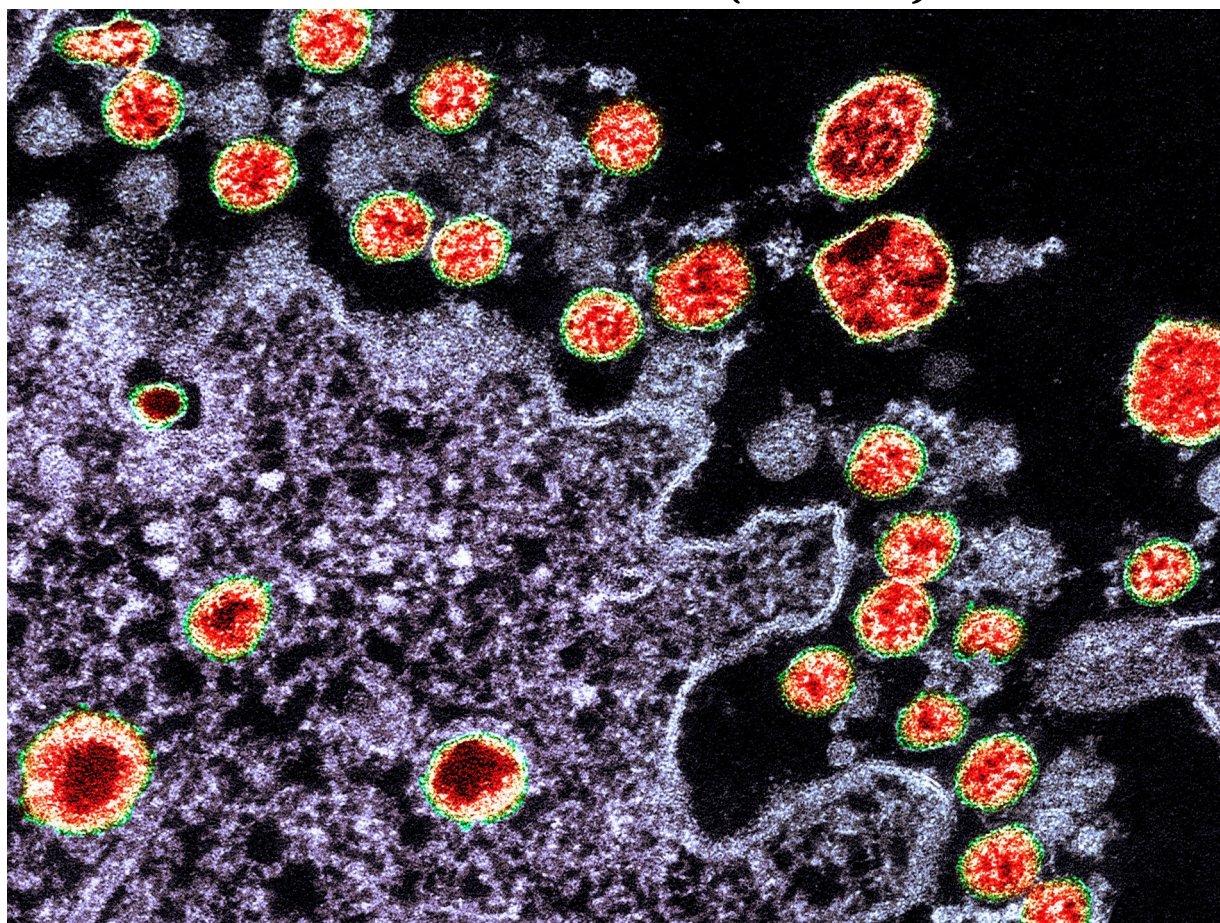


# ***RPG REVIEW***

***Issue #47, June 2020***

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## ***IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH***

***TP Total Pan ... Hit Point Systems ... PreGen  
Healers ... Disease in RQ ... Eclipse Phase .. Tales  
from the Loop: Worse Than Death .. D&D Demigods  
... Radioactive Review ... and much more!***

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## ADMINISTRIVIA

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## EDITORIAL AND COOPERATIVE NEWS

### Editorial and Cooperative News

Welcome to the 47<sup>th</sup> issue of RPG Review, with a central topic of "In Sickness and in Health", which seems particularly appropriate for this time of a global pandemic. How curious it is to think that as the novel coronavirus makes its way through the world and indeed continues to do so at an every increasing rate that there is still a sense of continuing activity among our shared hobby of traditional, tabletop RPGs, even if many of us are running these events by some sort of electronic communications. I cannot help but be reminded of a scene in Jeff Wayne's *Musical Version of The War of the Worlds* where he re-encounters the artilleryman, who has a great gulf between his dreams and action:

*We drank and then he insisted upon playing cards. With our species on the edge of extermination, with no prospect but a horrible death, we actually played games!*

The psychology desire to retain a sense of normalcy in a time of crisis is a normal human reaction, if irrational. One only needs to witness how the arts and culture tried to continue to during the siege of Leningrad as an example; on August 9, 1942 Symphony No. 7 "Leningrad" by Dmitri Shostakovich was performed by the Leningrad Radio Orchestra and broadcast on loudspeakers placed throughout the city, even aimed towards the enemy lines. Where do you put that behaviour Maslow? The reality is that even in circumstances that are real and visceral challenges to our security and even physiological needs there is a part of the human spirit that still finds room for beauty, music, art,

imagination, and, always, romance.

Besides, have you noticed how accurate the information is from science fiction movie buffs and gamers? It is almost as if they have been preparing for such things for decades. From a steady diet of zombie-infection films, such as *28 Days Later*, to the paranoia of John Carpenter's *The Thing*, there is a rich source of existing aesthetic products close to our heart which sometimes provides scientific insight appropriate to our current circumstances but more often have provided an insight to the human psyche. This said, if there is a zombie film that doesn't include a proportion of the population that thinks that the zombie outbreak is all a hoax, or it's caused by telecommunication towers, or that drinking bleach is a cure, will be justly condemned as not being realistic enough.

This issue of RPG Review contains lots of delicious content directly related to our main topic, health and healing. New contributor, Darren Lee, has kindly unearthed a letter from SARS-CoV2 which is a helpful introduction to the topic. Then from Nevil Kingston-Brown is TP PAN, a complete "roll-playing" game that you're already playing! Slightly more seriously is three articles by myself, one on the variety of hit point and healing systems in different RPG systems, one review of Hand of the Healer for Rolemaster and MERP, a review of disease in RuneQuest. Because of it's association with disease, and especially hidden disease, the gaming 'blog this issue is from my Eclipse Phase campaign, last featured in Issue 37! New contributor Martin Plowman provides some insight to some of the problems of not dying from Tales From the Loop, whereas the powerful machine of our journal, Karl Brown has provided a range of different pre-generated healers for a variety of (mainly D20-derived) game systems, the characteristics of undying demi-gods for D&D 5th edition, and medicine and healers in Gulliver's Trading Company. Slightly tangential to our topic is a review of the video game, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice by Andrew Daborn, and finally a review of the movie Radioactive by regular Andrew Moshos. Plus, we have a small selection of RPG gaming 'blogs from myself and Andrew Daborn.

As part of the Cooperative news it is necessary to mention that, after starting this journal ten years ago and acting as founding president of the incorporated association that manages it five years ago, I will be stepping down from both roles at the next Annual General Meeting. All organisations require a change in leadership in order to ensure a dynamic quality, and this one is no exception. There will be, of course, the need for transition, and I have offered to stay on as a committee member to aid and assist whoever takes up the role. The following are my current roles that can be distributed.

1. President. 1.1 Call and Chair Meetings. 1.2 Coordinate and be responsible for all association activities. 1.3 Publish newsletter
2. RPG Review Editor. 2.1 Edit articles, convert formats for publication, and layout. 2.2 Write/Find enough content to ensure 64 pages per issue. 2.3 Submit issues to National Library
3. IT. 3.1 Keep payments for domain and hosting up-to-date. 3.2 Manage services (Drupal, Mailman, MySQL, etc). 3.3 Publish content on website

The newsletter part is entirely optional and could be carried out by a different committee member, and the same applies to the RPG Review Editor. I am happy to continue carrying out the IT tasks. The President, in theory, is the role that has the least tasks, or the least required tasks, but also the one with the greatest responsibility and authority. It is really an opportunity for one to carve their own mark on the organisation. The journal editor is work, but it is also the flagship product of the association and has the largest reach.

Anyway, there are opportunities here. Who among you is going to be a player-character?

Lev Lafayette lev@rpgreview.net

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# LETTER FROM SARS-CoV-2

*Unearthed by Darren Lee*

He is a hero to us. Whatever he is to you or what you may think of him, he is a hero to us. To him we owe our very existence today, tomorrow and for a long time to come from now on. He did so very much for us, day and night. Even when he became well, he never stopped. And so it pains us to see him here in a hospital, in intensive care. We have been called many things. Unflattering names have a grain of truth in them, given prominence out of all proportion to real life and taken out of context.

When people call us parasites, they exaggerate at the very least. We are not a blight on this world. We are not parasites. If others cannot see what we contribute, we cannot say who lies, who errs or if a lie errs. He paid no heed to the names, the uncertainty or the lies. He helped us and he is a hero to us.

We are grateful for what he shared with us. We are grateful that he helped us when he was well. He helps us still, though he is unwell. You can see just how unwell. He lies unconscious in an intensive care bed. That is just what it means: intensive care. He is completely dependent on nursing and medical care around the clock. His condition is so critical that he is unable even to breathe for himself. His life hangs in the balance, but we hope that he will recover. He must, for the fate of millions depends on his.

You have been inside and seen for yourself how severely ill he is. A machine breathes for him; there are numerous tubes running everywhere; monitoring devices make incomprehensible noises. I heard a doctor say that a patient with six syringe pumps is unlikely to survive: he has five. The nurses and therapists have to wear gloves, visors, masks and gowns before they can give him his medication or check his condition.

He is critically ill and even so, he helps us still. For every moment he survives, he gives life to literally millions of us. We are, ironically, part of the reason he is here. We are the reason why everyone here wears gloves, gowns and visors. We are the reason why cities and countries have shut down. We are the reason why families have divided themselves. We are the reason why when somebody coughs or sneezes, everyone suddenly becomes tense and afraid.

There is no reason to be afraid of us. Doctors like to speak of the case fatality rate and other kinds of numbers but what do they really mean? They say the elderly are more likely to die but what does that mean? A virus does not have a choice of what kinds of people to infect. We are the ultimate product of a long process of evolution and we are pretty good at what we do. Our case fatality rate is low. There are other coronaviruses and they have higher fatality rates. We are much less likely to kill our hosts. This makes sense for us: a live host is the best host.

We are persistent. We have a good strong outer case and we can stay out in the environment for a good long time. We can survive for the length of time it takes for someone to come along and pick us up.

We are spread by droplets. This is anything from a cough to a sneeze but doctors are right to worry that anything that might make a spray or a mist is a risk. It helps us that sneezes can travel several feet.

We want to spread from one host to another and not cause much harm. All we want from a host in a quiet period of replication. We never get it. Thanks to the host's immune system, this never happens. Sometimes it happens quietly, but at other times the immune response can be very florid. Rarest of all are the most severe of immune responses and the most severe of illnesses, the kind that have placed him here in this intensive care unit.

Why do you need to know all of this? There is the matter of that few minutes you spent inside without your mask; we could not have gotten this close to you otherwise. We will spend the next two weeks getting ready with you. After that, you may feel a little unwell. But remember that whatever happens, you will forever be a hero to us.

# TP TOTAL PAN: THE ROLL PLAYING GAME

*by Nevil Kingston-Brown*

The Roll Playing Game You're Already Playing, v1.3 April AC

It began in 2020. Fear of a worldwide virus sparked a baseless panic that a persecuted minority group was hoarding TP. Wanting to secure his own supply, corrupt and incompetent Chief Executive Cornholio tweeted that all taxes must be paid in TP. Monetary authorities then shut down all TP manufacturers for currency counterfeiting. Within days, western civilization collapsed, as citizens plunged into a whirlpool of struggle for TP to staunch their bungleholes and/or tax bills.

Welcome to TP Total Pan! You are a regular citizen on a trip to the store, seeking TP, maybe something else to get you through this. You deserve a treat. You're a good person.

## How To Play

Every player needs time to waste, a desire for more TP, a six sided die (there's almost certainly one in the board games you dragged out when you were naïve enough to think that quarantine would bring your family/ precariat share house/pansexual anarchist collective closer together) and a video meeting connection.

Order of play is determined by the order in which participants logged into the meeting.

To do something in the game, narrate what you're doing and how (using your weapons, characteristics, etc). There will then be a show of hands of whether other players think your explanation is a winner (we're all judging each other; let's bring it out in the open. It's OK to abstain). Then roll your die, add positive votes, subtract negative votes, and add applicable bonuses (explained below).

If you want to help another character and are in a position to do so, you can add your bonuses to their roll. If you then want to attack someone who just helped you, you can add their bonuses to your roll (Sucker!)

If contesting something with another player (e.g. who seizes the last roll of TP in the store) the winner is the highest total, otherwise you need a 5 or better. Whoever logged in earlier wins a tie between players. If you lose a combat or challenge, mute your microphone for 30 seconds.

If an antagonist needs to be voiced, or a situation needs further description, this is done by a muted person, or the person who logged in after you.

## Bonuses

+1	for problems with sound or video connection
+1	if it drops out entirely 4
+1	per interruption by children, partner, pets, boss...
+1	if you stop and attend to their needs
+	bonuses for equipment, name, etc; see below.

You can choose whether to add or subtract these bonuses from your roll on the charts below.

## Character

Call your character (of any gender) Karen, or roll on these charts:

1	Arnold
2	Max
3	Ripley
4	Sarah
5	Vasquez
6	Viggo
7+	Karen

In case of multiple Karens, add additional qualifiers, e.g. Original Recipe Karen, Posh Karen, Spooky Karen, 2nd Amendment Karen, Doing-Cyberporn-to-make-Rent Karen. We can all be Karen if we work hard and believe in ourselves.

You are a:

1	Senile Silent Alleged Veteran
2	Pompous Boomer Windbag
3	Ineffectual GenX Slacker
4	Ungrateful Millennial Whiner
5	Smartphone-controlled Zoomer Brat
6	Visitor from another Civilization/Time/Planet
7+	Member of the Risen Dead

You are armed with:

1	A weaponized walkingframe/shopping cart/chair (+1 for Silents)
2	Deeds to three tax-minimized investment properties (+1 for Boomers)
3	A bulletproof sense of entitlement (+1 for GenXers)
4	An ultrasonic two-year-old (+1 for Millennials)
5	A live video feed to your subscribers (+1 for Zoomers)
6	A Supersoaker TM full of cleansing alcohol gel, and a lighter (+1 for Max)
7+	Your teeth and claws (+1 for Karen)

Probably someone else wants or has equipment that would give you a bonus. Feel free to rob (or trade with) them after the store opens.



You want TP, and:

1	Plain flour, baking powder and a WWII ration cook book (+1 for Silents)
2	A small artisanal-distillery botanical gin and Indian tonic water (+1 for Boomers)
3	Nirvana's Greatest Hits, on vinyl (+1 for GenXers)
4	Stone-ground non-gluten sourdoughbread and a ripe organic non-GM avocado (+1 for Millennials)
5	Biodegradable Nespresso™ Coffee Pods (+1 for Zoomers)
6	Spare parts for a time/space transport device (+1 for Visitors)
7+	Some goddamn respect! (+1 for Vasquez)

### Setting and Antagonists

Take turns to roll on these tables to create the setting. The store is:

1	The last mom-and-pop-owned corner store in the entire tri-state area (-1 to everyone except Silents)
2	A premium mediocre boutique individualized chain outlet (-1 to everyone except Boomers)
3	A soul-sucking megacorp owned by a Marvel supervillain's secret identity. It's unethical to shop there. You penniless peasant. (-1 to everyone except GenXers)
4	Like, the fifth one you've tried today (-1 to everyone except Millennials)
5	A charity food bank (-1 to everyone except Zoomers)
6	An outlet catering to an ethnic/religious/social group you don't know anything about and you should probably feel vaguely guilty about that (-1 to everyone except Visitors)
7+	A front for... (roll again):

1	Organised crime (-1 to everyone except Max)
2	A neo-Nazi militia (-1 to everyone except Arnold, or Silents, who know what to do)
3	An anarcho-communist survivalist cell (-1 to everyone except Sarah, or if you have a WWII ration cook book)
4	An alien invasion (-1 to everyone except Vasquez or Visitors)
5	Them! (-1 to everyone except Ripley, or if you have bread)
6	Orcs. Wait, what? (-1 to everyone except Viggo)
7+	Zombies (-1 to everyone except Karen)

The TP, and the things you want (roll separately for each person's things) are in aisle x (roll the die) and are:

1	The last one in the store, everyone else will have to fight you for it
2	On a shelf that's like eight feet off the ground
3	In an aisle with no lights or aircon/heating
4	Wired to a bomb

5	In the store room at the back, you'll have to persuade The Staff to get it
6	Behind that guy who's coughing constantly (-1 to
7+	In The Manager's office. See The Manager.

Various products mentioned are like trademarked by corporations or whatever.

The Staff:

1	Are cyborgs (-1 to everyone except Sarah and Arnold)
2	Have been working for 36 hours (-1 to everyone except Viggo, or if you give them coffee pods)
3	Are aliens wearing human skin suits (-1 to everyone except Vasquez, or if you give them space/time device parts)
4	Are postapocalyptic BDSM fetishists (-1 to everyone except Max)
5	Have had enough of your crap! (-1 to everyone except Ripley)
6	Are another gang in disguise trying to infiltrate the store and steal the TP, roll on "a front for" (above)
7+	are The Manager (-1 to everyone except Karen)

The Manager:

1	Is Skynet (+1 for Sarah and Arnold)
2	Is high (+1 for GenXers)
3	Is an Alien queen (+1 for Ripley and Visitors)
4	Is Dracula. Surprise! (-1 for everyone)
5	It's Dark Lord Saur... JK IT'S YOUR MOM! (+1 for Viggo)
6	Is videocalling in from home (-1 for everyone except Zoomers)
7+	Will be with you in just a moment, sir or ma'am (-1 for everyone. Except Karen.)

**They will only accept payment in:**

1	Gold (-1 to everyone except Silents)
2	Cash even though its unhygienic and you never carry it any more (-1 to everyone except Boomers)
3	Pullchain-encrypted Bitcoin™ (-1 to everyone, roll again on this table to see what they're worth today)
4	Ongoing pledges to their Kickstarter™ to start a union to demand a living wage and sick leave (-1 to everyone except Millennials)
5	YouTube™ or Twitch™ follows (-1 to everyone except Zoomers)
6	Precious Bodily Fluids (-1 to everyone except Karen and Max)
7+	TP

**The Flush of Victory**

The winner is the first person to exit the store with TP and their desired things.



# HIT POINTS: A REVIEW OF SYSTEMS AND SCOPE

*by Lev Lafayette*

## Introduction

The notion of "hit points", first raised in Dungeons & Dragons (1974), has become a staple of tabletop roleplaying games and computer games. Sometimes hit points are represented as a numerical value which increase in level (e.g., D&D, Rolemaster). In other games they are relatively static (BRP, Hero System, GURPS, World of Darkness), or represented as a conditional track (FATE). Loss of hit points in some games has minimal effect until a critical threshold is reached, and in others there is a gradual loss of abilities. In some cases the improvements in hit points, if they improve, are static and in other cases they are random. In some cases healing of hit points is readily and easily available, and others not so much. Then there's the scope of hit points, what they are can be applied to. In all cases they represent \*something\* to do with a character's health, and the design decisions made have a very real influence on how the game plays out. Exploring some of these options in advance helps make clear in the minds of the players what sort of game that they're playing.

## Increasing or Static?

One of the obvious differences in the way that games represent hit points is whether they are relatively static as a representation of full health, or whether they increase in value with character advancement. From the earliest games, increasing value hit point systems were initiated by Dungeons & Dragons and Tunnels & Trolls, whereas the more static model was represented by Traveller and RuneQuest. Broadly speaking, the appeal of the former was a "gamist" orientation and the latter of a "simulationist" orientation. Just witness the quantity of debates back and forth through 'zines such as Alarums & Excursions which illustrate the intensity of thought on the relative merits of these positions.

The appeal of the former position comes down to a sense of making the game more enjoyable through increasing capabilities by an order of levels. In addition to the benefits gain by skill improvements, which are typically gained in fairly small increments (typically 5%), a gain in hit points from first to second level doubles, three times from first to third and so forth. As a result, the improvement capability of confronting martial antagonists also increases proportionally. Even screening out the modest improvements in skill level, a 2nd level character is twice as likely to defeat an Orc (one could use an "Orc standard") than a 1st level character. Maybe Gnolls are more of a test of the character's level, and at 3rd level, the giddy heights of a Bugbear! As early playtests suggested, players were attached to their characters and didn't want to be subject to the same rules all the time:

*"They didn't care if they could kill a monster in one blow, but they didn't want the monster to kill them in one blow."*

Dave Arneson (2004 Interview in GameSpy <http://pc.gamespy.com/articles/540/540395p1.html>)

In contrast, the appeal of the latter position was about making the game more enjoyable through an exploration of a realistic simulation. Maybe an especially skilled or burly human could use acumen to defeat a bugbear, but when characters have more hit points than say a ten-metre dragon the sense of verisimilitude to the "realists" is ruined. In such games, the argument went, hit points remained relatively static, even as other skills, abilities, and especially magic increased. For some games there was no problem with this in terms of the general narrative. In Traveller, for example, characters usually remained relatively static in all their abilities throughout the entire campaign! In RuneQuest, whilst hit points may not have changed a character's access to the favours of the Gods (represented by magic) certainly

increased. In other words, there was a magical path that could simulate the gradual increase in the scale of antagonist without changing the physical realism of a static hit point method.

Despite the appeal to a gamist creative agenda, there were also various attempts to provide some realistic justification for the decision. Consider Gygax's words in the Players Handbook (p34) and then in the Dungeon Masters Guide (p82):

*A typical man-at-arms can take about 5 hit points of damage before being Killed. Let us suppose that a 10th level fighter has 55 hit points, plus a bonus of 30 hit points for his constitution, for a total of 85 hit points. This IS the equivalent of about 18 hit dice for creatures, about what it would take to kill four huge warhorses. It is ridiculous to assume that even a fantastic fighter can take that much punishment. The same holds true to a lesser extent for clerics, thieves, and the other classes. Thus, the majority of hit points are symbolic of combat skill, luck (bestowed by supernatural powers), and magical forces.*

Players Handbook, p34

*It is quite unreasonable to assume that as a character gains levels of ability in his or her class that a corresponding gain in actual ability to sustain physical damage takes place. It is preposterous to state such an assumption, for if we are to assume that a man is killed by a sword thrust which does 4 hit points of damage, we must similarly assume that a hero could, on the average, withstand five such thrusts before being slain! Why then the increase in hit points? Because these reflect both the actual physical ability of the character to withstand damage – as indicated by constitution bonuses- and a commensurate increase in such areas as skill in combat and similar life-or-death situations, the "sixth sense" which warns the individual of some otherwise unforeseen events, sheer luck, and the fantastic provisions of magical protections and/or divine protection.*

Dungeon Masters Guide, p82

So sometimes (with the brawn of monsters) hit points do represent "meat", whereas sometimes (in the case of heroic characters) they represent skill and luck. Which then raises the question of when do monsters gain levels? From third edition onwards in the correct, but somewhat unsatisfactory answer. Or when does one apply just "meat" hit points to characters? Well, there is one oft-overlooked section - assassination. Apart from the fact that the assassin character class can use the Assassination Table (p75 DMG), any attack against a helpless character also uses it. Which implies that attacks against helpless characters is evil, but that's for a different article.

The main point being is I think the "static" systems have an advantage of adaptability here, and quoting justifications for increasing hit points illustrates this. Whereas the "increasing" systems have to add on additional rules for when a "static" approach should apply, the "static" system can use different elements of the game universe to either create circumstances where game play can represent a consistent level of challenge (e.g., Traveller) or one where there is explicit intervention from "magical and/or divine protection" - not to mention the presence of dodge and parry skills.

One alternative that must be mentioned is the Rolemaster system and its kin. At first glance Rolemaster looks like a standard increasing hit points system. But this is actually not entirely the case. Rolemaster is having a bite from both ends, so to speak. The skill that governs hit points is "Body Development", which is described as the ability to resist concussion from various blows. Hit points, effectively, are governed by the critical charts, and they don't change; except in the case of large, and superlarge creatures and, if one is using the optional rules in a certain Rolemaster Companion VI, variation on critical effects according to size level.

One other curious convention in increasing hit point systems is the use of a random die-roll on a per level basis to determine how many hit points are gained. This can generate some rather unpleasant indefinite results from a gamist perspective ("Oh, your Barbarian rolled a '1' again.. Better luck next level,eh?") and really doesn't make much sense when every other ability has a definite gain in value. This is an easy fix of course, simply apply what would be the average die-roll for the character class.

### **Granularity of Ability Loss**

Different approaches to hit point loss have diverse degrees of effect from said loss. Again, representing the elephant in the room, Dungeons & Dragons has a particular approach where the effects are close to all-or-nothing, which certainly minimises a lot of in-game bookkeeping. The all-or-nothing approach basically means that a character with close to zero hit points is just as functional as a character with maximum hit-points. They will fight on, at full ability, until the last paper-cut causes them to fall over unconscious or dead, depending on the edition. In D&D 4th edition a "bloodied" degree is added, when the character is at half their hit points or lower. In these cases various powers can come into effect, both positive and negative, and depending on the class or creature. It also served as an at-a-glance descriptor of a character's condition. There was a curious approach among some whereby hit-points were kept secret, even for one's own character; which led to the witty retort, "Well, on a scale from 1 to 36, how do I feel?".

At the other end of the scale are "threshold" systems. In a game like GURPS a character who is wounded receives an immediate shock effect to the attributes, with temporary and permanent crippling injuries to limbs, stun and knockdown levels, reeling effects when a character is reduced to low hit points, then a level of potential unconsciousness, then multiple levels of potential death. With a similar level of detail one can look at the Hero System, which introduces similar effects at various levels. The Hero System also has the additional level of granularity by differentiating between BODY, STUN, and END, effectively generating three different tracks of how ability loss can occur and with transfers between the two. Loss of BODY is the sort of damage that can kill, loss of STUN can cause unconsciousness, and loss of END causes exhaustion (usually reflected as an inability to use Powers). Appropriately there are two types of damage in the Hero System, Normal and Killing attacks, the former largely taretting STUN and the latter targetting BODY and STUN (and by-passing the "toughness" of the character. Another system which has multiple tracks for temporary bruises and more permanent wounds is Papers & Paychecks.

RuneQuest is another threshold system where there is a track for both total hit points and locational hit points (Mongoose editions had locational only); damage that exceeds the locational damage can disable or even destroy the location which can also generate unconsciousness or death. The same applies for total hit points as well; a character with low total hit points is unconscious, and zero is dead. Note that there is an problematic scaling issue here; small creatures (e.g., cat or a rat) would start the game "unconscious", except the most recent edition of the game derives total hit points from Constitution and modified by Size, rather than the average of the two. It gives quite a significant and surprising advantage to creatures with a high CON but small SIZ that did not exist in some other editions of the game; the sapient duck-like durulz can find that they have similar hit points to a riding horse as a result! This does have a peculiar effect on the granularity of the ability loss where larger creatures with an average CON come across as having a proverbial "glass jaw" where smaller creatures with a high CON are surprisingly stubborn.

Another variation is what is sometimes called a "death spiral" (I encountered this term from David Larkins on EnWorld, who compared it to Tik-Tik-Boom, or in this article's parlance, "All-Or-Nothing"), where wound effects do not just remove hit points but also remove the capacity for the character to act in an incremental manner. Whereas threshold systems do this as well, they introduce the effects at particular break-points. In a "death spiral" system the wound effects are a lot more incremental. Eclipse Phase is a game which introduces a "death spiral", where each

Wound a character receives reduces their ability to perform actions (including tests to resist unconsciousness) by 10%. A character who is hit by multiple Wounds soon finds that they are not only bordering on unconsciousness but also also is quite unable to fight back effectively. Rolemaster and its kin are another and even stronger example of the death spiral. Not only are their wound-like thresholds for a loss of skill bonuses, but there are also the effects of criticals which can cause negatives on skills and blood loss (generating effects which hit further threshold points).

One of the effects of the different types of granularity is how players react to the game's environment. In "All-or-Nothing" systems players tend to be quite cavalier about the damage that is inflicted on their character until the possibility of the "All" effects come within reach. It is, in many ways, well suited to the tropes of heroic fantasy. In "Threshold" systems players tend to do their utmost to avoid damage as they have some many different ways of being hurt, and contrawise they try to inflict as much damage as possible in single blows to punch through the protection of other characters; it's a pretty brutal environment, which would suit dark fantasy or cyberpunk-style games. Finally, in "death spiral" games players can be very risk avoidant, especially of situations where there is limited possibility of retreat. A character who is trapped in a losing battle is going to be worn down, piecemeal, to a very tragic end, which is thematically quite wonderful for horror games.

There is sense here where contradictory desires can come into play; on the one hand your author doesn't care much for the tropes of heroic fantasy built into the game system, except as some sort of meta-game currency (e.g., Fate/Drama Points) that depend on character importance and player contribution. On the other hand the book-keeping of a game should be kept to a minimum in actual play, and especially during dramatic moments such as combat. To quote the objective of early RuneQuest "playable realism" is the goal here, even if that game could get pretty crunchy at times. One game system which has performed the task quite admirably is HeroQuest (the RPG, not the old boardgame), which applies some rather coarse-grained but noticable penalties on characters when they lose a conflict. With minimal bookkeeping it provides a "death spiral" effect if the characters continue to do what they are doing; in other words, it encourages the players to think in an innovative way out of a problem ("Hmmm, I'm losing the physical battle; maybe I should think my way out this condumdrum").

### **Scope: What Types of Hit Points?**

Up to this point there has been an assumption that hit points represent health, and specifically physical health. As noted some games, following in the footsteps of the Hero System, differentiated between "brusing" damage and "killing" damage. The most well-known of these is the White Wolf series of games, which has been mostly clearly differentiated in the Revised Storyteller system. In that system, damage can either be "Bashing", the least severe and easiest to recover from; "Lethal", which consists of serious trauma and typically requires medical attentions, and "Aggravated" damage which is supernaturally caused injuries. In addition there is a parallel damage system which affects the fae called "Chimerical" damage, which has the same types.

Even in the earliest game systems there were, occassionally, different ways of representing non-physical types of damage. A sort of supernatural damage was expressed in early editions of Dungeons & Dragons in the form of level-drain usually by undead or creatures that had an association with the negative energy plane. It was, in some regards, a pretty weird sort of thing to target as "levels" in that game system were a type of "rank" (as explicitly stated in the beginning of the Players Handbook) which, apart from the various martial and magical abilities that were associated with this sort of skill progression, also came with social benefits. "Yeah, I got hit by a wight a couple of times, so I've had to give up the castle. No longer name-level, you see". But one of the most frightening aspects of losing levels in AD&D was the downright brutal loss of experience points given how demanding that level progression was in those editions.

The Chaosium BRP-based games, RuneQuest and Call of Cthulhu, also had their own supplementary damage systems, namely POW and SAN. In RuneQuest POW(er) was an characteristic, much like Strength, Dexterity, Charisma, etc and it determined, primarily, the magical power that was available to the character and the magic points that they had for spells. In some magical contests a character could find themselves reduced to 0 magic points and fall unconscious, even though they had received no physical damage. If the character was fighting spirits they would become possessed! Further, to gain access to power Rune magics one would typically have to reduce their POWER, i.e., sacrifice part of their soul, to the gods. Like the loss of magic points, but on another level, a character who lost all their POW was dead, regardless of physical damage.

Call of Cthulhu kept similar sorts of mechanics as it also used a POW characteristic, magic points etc. But there was the additional inclusion of the SANity value, initially rated on POW\*5, but with a maximum rating of 99 minus the character's Mythos skill. Fitting the theme of "Knowledge of the Cthulhu Mythos will drive you insane" a slow fuse was lit under characters as successive discoveries and encounters would cause their SAN to drop in the course of a campaign. Added to that were temporary insanity events which a character received a significant hit against their current SAN value, and the prospect of more permanent insanity when it fell below zero. It was, as many have remarked, as system of "hit points for the head", and a much needed extension of the notion of a "hit points" system.

More recently there has been a move towards consistency in physical and social hit point systems, of which Fate is certainly a prominent example. Fate's measurement of hit points is through Physical and Mental Stress tracks. Stress represents temporary fatigue, superficial injuries and, well, stress itself. When a character takes more damage (known as shift) than they have Stress, they suffer a Consequence, a lasting injury of some sort, with an appropriate descriptive to the type of injury, which also equates to a shift value.

Few games have "social hit points"; one could look at reputational changes as an equivalent, with various break points such as Cult Spirits of Retribution in RuneQuest or changes to alignment or Charisma in Dungeons & Dragons. Traveller has a Social Standing attribute, although it is more common for that attribute to increase over time, and it certainly doesn't have a "social combat" system. One exception which your author is justly proud of, is Papers & Paychecks which includes a consistent system for physical, mental, and social damage including short term "bruises" and long-term "wounds".

### **Availability of Healing**

Martin Rayla makes a good point at GnomeStew under the title "Healing Time Sets The Tempo" (<https://gnomestew.com/healing-time-sets-the-tempo/>). Using examples from Dungeons and Dragons, Star Trek (Decipher), Hunter: The Reckoning, and Pendragon, Martin shows how "How fast characters heal, and how readily they can speed up that process, has a major impact on the flow of your game. It's definitely worth taking into consideration when planning or running a campaign." In Dungeons & Dragons, where healing potions and appropriate magics are readily available, the tempo is pretty much from one combat scene-by-scene. In Star Trek, recovery can be measured in hours; a character severely wounded in one combat won't be immediately available for action by the next scene, but they will be around the following day. In Pendragon a major wound can put a knight out of action for a year.

Of course (apart from an appeal to realism), Pendragon is designed a game to be played out over the natural life of the character with roughly one scenario per year, and often their children as well. A Dungeons and Dragons style healing

system in Pendragon would probably not suit that type of story (faerie and pagan magics notwithstanding), and a Pendragon level of healing in a Dungeons and Dragons would really make for quite a different game, and not one which published scenarios are well-designed for. As mentioned in the GnomeStew article, if a campaign has the sort of story that doesn't allow for much time between sessions, and you have seriously wounded characters that will require that time to heal (the example of Hunter: The Reckoning is provided), then problems will arise. It is not stated explicitly, but let's do so here; not only will there be a change in tempo, as the article mentions, but also a big disjoint between the game's narrative and the player's in-game experience: "Sorry, your character is out of action for the next ... [checks notes] six sessions. How do you fancy playing an NPC?"

The rate of healing can and should vary according to the damage type. In White Wolf's Storyteller games, bashing and even lethal damage against the supernaturally powerful characters often results in some various rapid healing. I recall with some amused fondness of the PCs in a Werewolf game I was running who were quite unaware of how quickly werewolves heal, even against lethal damage such as automatic fire. There was a glorious amount of planning which came unstuck and resulted in the PCs being on the receiving end of a spray of bullets, the sort of damage that would leave a regular person in the hands of their next of kin. The rapid healing that followed was a real confidence booster.

Whilst on the topic of damage type, and highly related to the availability of healing, one of the thankfully largely overlooked tables in the first edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was the disease and infection tables which recommended a monthly or weekly check depending on conditions, occurrence of acute or chronic, and a severity level of mild, severe, or terminal. Rules-as-writ, the tables were *<i>brutal</i>* with most characters dying after five years or so even in fairly optimal circumstances. Mid-level Clerics and the occasional Paladin are doing to have their work cut seriously out for them, and given that "adventuring class" characters are described as "one-in-a-hundred" individuals, the AD&D social universe is one that depopulates itself rather quickly.

Likewise with healing being profession-based one can look at the healing of "mental hit points". In Call of Cthulhu Sanity can be recovered by defeating mythos beings, and temporary insanity can be alleviated by the use of the psychoanalysis skill, with treated indefinite insanity generating a slow, monthly, recovery. Commitment to an asylum, depending on the quality, may actually cause additional insanity. This is all comparable to the healing of physical wounds, and one can see an equivalent approach in Eclipse Phase, which has a fine-grained representation in the style of Stress Points with thresholds for more a more damaging effect as Trauma, which leads to conditions known as Derangements and the more permanent Disorders. Stress in Eclipse Phase is slower and more difficult to heal than physical damage, especially through natural healing, but much quicker with therapy. Of course, with future technologies Eclipse Phase also offers rather impressive physical healing (for biomorphs) and repair systems (for synthmorphs), along with back-up systems to provide reduced effects of mortality.

An alternative to healers includes magical potions and various equipment systems. Potions can, of course, take many implementations in various game systems but those that have the greatest balance are a sort of "implement a healing spell into the potion liquid", although this is lacking in setting flavour. A particularly flavoursome implementation can be found in Rolemaster where, in Spell Law, there are two major healing character professions, the Healer and the Lay Healer. The former heals wounds in what initially appears to be the traditional manner until one realises that, due to the power of the channelling magic system, they actually transfer the wounds from the target to themselves and then heal themselves. The lay healer, in contrast, is an expert in developing prostheses. Whilst healers in that game often come across as under-powered initially, they curiously make good second-line fighters due to their ability to subconsciously heal themselves. Which is perhaps just as well, as the availability of powerful healing herbs is an alternative to healers in both Shadow World and Middle Earth supplements. Consideration of what prevents turning such powerful herbage into a farming industry is necessary.

Leaning towards perfectionist in terms of scope and consistency, one can look at GURPS as the example of how a generic system can implement healing across multiple genres and avenues, with healing available through technology, magic, and psionics. The technological approaches suggest gradual improvement in speed and results over "tech levels", with various threshold levels reached and great detail in the relevant supplements (e.g., Low-Tech, High-Tech, Ultra-Tech, Bio-Tech). The magic system, regrettably dull, also offers a gradual improvement in capability with the completion of prerequisites and availability of mana, offering a positive confirmation of Clarke's Law, and also the realisation that a "low or no magic" setting is quite a challenge in terms of healing at low technology levels.

## Preferences

It should be clear that the way that hit points are implemented, their scope, and the manner they are recovered, can have enormous effects on a game, the style of play, and can contribute significantly to the flavour of the setting. There are principles of game design that out to be considered when selecting or modifying an existing game system. Firstly, whatever hit point system is used should avoid complexity and contradictions in the game system. Mention was made of how various relatively static hit point systems largely avoid some of the issues that arise from increasing systems. Secondly, the granularity of ability loss should be implemented in a manner that satisfies multiple design objectives; "playable realism" is a good pithy criteria principle, with an emphasis on the former given that hit point damage usually occurs in dramatic circumstances, and heavy book-keeping is not desirable. A lot of granularity is "realistic", but does not expediate the actual play experience. Thus some granularity, cleanly implemented, provides for both the immersive quality but without the jolting effects in actual play. Likewise having a consistent scope of hit point across the pragmatic experiential physical, social, and mental worlds can also provide a richer experience of the shared imaginary space without needing to treat each case as a special case. Finally, the rate and recovery of hit points needs to be balanced against the magic and technology of the setting, the relationship with the type of damage being healed, and the relative rates received from professionals versus natural and artificial equipment. In short, there is a lot more to hit points than marking off a few scratches on the character sheet! They will, most certainly, make a big difference to the game experience and positive and negative player experiences depending on design are not just possible, but almost a certainty.





# HAND OF THE HEALER REVIEW

*by Lev Lafayette*

## **Hand of the Healer Review (Mark R. Feil, ICE, 1997)**

Whilst all MERP products are highly sought after, and the "Hands of the Healer" sourcebook particularly so. Designed in the second edition style of that particular line, and close to the tail-end before ICE had their license ingloriously revoked, Hands of the Healer comes as a 160 page well-bound softback. The cover art by Wendy Frazer, from a famous healing scene from Lord of the Rings, is evocative and shows talent. The internal art, whilst also evocative, talented, and thematically appropriate, is a mixture of the contextually appropriate and filler variety. The maps are quite attractive and are up to the standard often used in ICE's MERP products. The text is provided in two-column justified and a smaller serif-font, with clearly marked page numbers but no chapter or section indicator.

The writing style is formal, and rather heavy going, but packed full of information and written by one who clearly loves the grand detail of Middle-Earth and wishes to contribute to it heavily themselves. The formal text is supplemented with "scholarly comments" in narrative form from a certain Findegald, loremaster to King Eldarion and compiler of the Red Book of Westmarch, who studies the healing cultures of Middle-Earth. There is a single-page table of contents and a herb index, with the chapter consisting of The Pillars of Leechcraft., The Healer's Lore., Herbs, Curatives, and Posions, and an Appendix which includes scenarios for the Middle-Earth Collectible Card Game.

## **Pillars and Lore**

A short Introduction rather beautifully places the role of the healer in the context of the setting, selecting examples from The Silmarillion and Lord of the Rings, and noting the Valar in particular who aid that role and the gifts they have provided. The introduction also notes that the supplement is the first in a Lore of Middle Earth series. Information in the supplement is keyed for Middle-Earth Role Playing, Rolemaster Standard System, and the Lord of the Rings Adventure Game.

The Introduction is followed by relatively short chapter The Pillars of Leechcraft, covers matters of skills, spells, and herb-use. As a modification and elaboration of the skills system from MERP and Rolemaster, the supplement describes the skills of Physic, First Aid/Surgery, Midwifery, and Apothecary, each with their own static maneuver table. This is followed by modifications and elaborations to appropriate spell lists, especially with regard to the Animist lists in MERP and Rolemaster, with a particular interest in re-interpreting the mechanics so that more appropriate to the style of the Middle-Earth setting, in particular the Lifekeeping, Lifegiving, and Joining magics. It illustrates an example how shoe-horning the high and powerful magic system of Rolemaster into the subtle and relatively low-magic of Middle Earth was always difficult at best, and the modifications are necessary for those who wish to emphasise the accuracy of the setting. With regard to herbs, the chapter provides the mechanics for finding herbs, based on their relative rarity, the knowledge of herbs (herb-lore skill), and preparation and application.

Making up just under half the book, The Healer's Lore covers various healing traditions throughout Middle-Earth, with a not unexpected focus on the regions of the core writings, but also with some consideration of the cultures includes in various non-canon ICE supplements (e.g., the far south). Each broad tradition is broken down into their subgroups, for example the Northman Traditions has subchapters on The Horse-Lords, The Men of Dale and Lake-Town, The Woodmen, and the Boernings. Some ten traditions and a total of forty-four cultures are described, although the Dwarves are listed in a homogenous manner. Each of the cultures are described with their own skills and interpretations

of the standard MERP/Rolemaster spell lists.

For example, the Elven tradition has a Healing Meditation skill, and Healing Songs from the spell lists. The cultures refer to the specific practises of the healing profession according to MERP and Rolemaster. This may also include skills and spells; for example the Grey and Wood Elves have access to the skill Yavanna's Song, which enhances herbs. The Dwarves make use of gemstones to provide various protective and healing magics. The so-called "Black Numenoreans" makes ample use of drugs, astrology, and eugenics, Umbar has its necromatic priests, and so forth. The non-canon inclusions are quite interesting as well. The Asdriags and Odhriags of Rhun have various brews and spiritual healings, the Haruze of Near Harad have a formal and civilised system of physicians, mystics, and guilds for midwifery, apothecary, alchemy and herbalism. There are also mythical stories associated with some of the cultures as well, such as the notable Fuinur's Well, "which still contain echoes of the First Spring of Arda", which comes with potent healing and life-keeping powers. Despite all this there are some curious, even unacceptable, omissions. Despite being numerically the single largest population grouping there is nothing for the multitude of Orcish traditions. Let alone more exotic kin, such as the Ents.

### **Herbs, Poisons, and Appendicies**

Also making up just under half the book is the chapter on Herbs, Curatives, and Poisons - although in the table contents it is expressed as a single line, rather than the chapter and sub-chapter detail used for the healing traditions. In total there are almost three hundred different herbs, curatives, and poisons and of course includes the favourites from the stories such as athelas, miruvor or lembas. It combines everything that has appeared in prior MERP publications - which is quite significant, and adds some sixty-seven new entries.

The entries are provided in alphabetical order. They are provided their usual name, alternative names, references (e.g., which MERP book), Range/Where Found, a descriptive Characteristics, Medicinal Uses, Other Uses, Cost, Difficulty of Finding, and Warning. Most are described in around a fifth of a page as a result and, to be honest, it is certainly the an extensive and well-presented collection of herbs for a fantasy roleplaying game.

The Appendicies make for an interesting contribution in their own right. There are two scenarios and cards for the MECCG, an organisation of the herbs according to environment, rather than geography, which would have been much more useful. Another, more useful, organisation of the herbs is by usage (e.g., nutrition, nerve repair, poison etc).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Overall, Hands of the Healer is a useful product, packed full of information (with astoundingly glaring omissions noted), and mostly well-presented. Given the quantity of information more attempt should have been given to the organisation of the text. However, for any Rolemaster or MERP campaign it is a fairly impressive compilation and elaboration of a facet of the campaign world that has been very important, and certainly more important than what has been represented in many other settings.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .6 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .7 (product) = 3.9

Substance: 1 + .9 (content) + .7 (text) + .6 (fun) + .6 (workmanship) + .5 (system) = 4.3

# DISEASE IN RUNEQUEST ROLEPLAYING IN GLORANTHA

*by Lev Lafayette*

The representation of disease in RuneQuest involves a very different worldviews to what many would be familiar with. Whilst RuneQuest is strictly part of the Basic Role Playing family of games (including Call of Cthulhu, Ringworld, ElfQuest etc) with a variant on the basic principle of "d100, roll under" mechanic, in RuneQuest Roleplaying in Glorantha, the high fantasy setting assumes a particular metaphysic which is incorporated in the resolution of certain mechanics, including the acquisition of disease. However, this is a certain inconsistency in the core rules which fluctuate between trying to be a realistic simulation and the evocative high fantasy setting. This article reviews the current expression of disease in RuneQuest Roleplaying in Glorantha and proposes some alternative rules which provide a consistent expression of the setting and a satisfying simulation of that setting that accords with "real world" realism.

## The Representation of Disease

Under the core rules when an adventurer is exposed to a disease, a check against CONx5 is required, with a failed roll indicating infection, and continuing tests indicating the degree of infection (0 failures is no infection, 1 failure is mild, 2 is acute, 3 serious, 4 is terminal). Infection causes a loss of a characteristic, and subsequent losses refers to a the rate of continuing loss, mild causing an additional 1 point per week, acute is 1 point per day, serious is 1 point per hour, and terminal 1 per turn. For what it's worth the authors have confused and coflated the the frequency of a disease (acute or chronic) with the severity (mild, serious, terminal). In reality, a person can have an acute serious disease or a chronic mild version, for example. At each point of the time period specified another CONx5 is allowed with the severity reduced one level. (p154, RuneQuest core rulebook).

As shown the diseases of Glorantha attack characteristics and are given appropriate names (e.g., Brain Fever for INT, Creeping Chills for CON, Soul Waste for POW etc). There are a number of less common diseases as well, which usually not quite as deadly. Blotches causes a loss of CHA, and Thunder Lung can cause an destructive explosion to the character. In addition there are simple sneezes and sniffles (p155, RuneQuest core rulebook). Of all the diseases listed the resolution is via characteristic rolls (CONx5) with the exception of Thunder Lung which operates according to Potency (POT). This is somewhat surprising since earlier in the rules it specifies that diseases and poisons are measured by in POT and the resistance table is used to determine resolution (p146, RuneQuest core rulebook). Whilst a characteristic check is the equivalent of POT 10, greater variation can be introduced by applying variant POT to the various diseases and using the resistance table instead of characteristic checks for tests.

This also becomes an issue with regards to healing skills. With the Alchemy skill one activity includes the production of medicines, where each medicine type is specific to the disease it cures, matching the POT of the medicine against the POT of the disease. In this context, the POT of the disease is actually determined by the degree of infection; Mild is 2, Acute is 6, Serious is 12, and Terminal is 20. However, if the disease has been caused by a disease spirit, the medicine must match its POT vs. the spirit's POW (p176, RuneQuest core rulebook). The skill Treat Disease is more poorly implemented; it doubles the chance of success for a victim at their next CON roll (or triple for a critical). The rules say "Victims of acute, serious, or terminal diseases must be tended constantly to get this bonus" (p182, RuneQuest core rulebook).

Usually followers of Mallia, the goddess of disease, Broo are the classic sapient being for a disease vector with 50%

(p92 RuneQuest Bestiary) carrying a random disease on its body or weapons. Through worship of Mallia, Broo gain the access to the Rune spells Carry Disease (2pts) which allows the Broo to be an immune carrier of a disease, Cause Disease (1pt, stackable) which causes a target that become infected with a disease with severity increasing by the POW of the spell, 1 for mild, 2 for acute, 3 for serious, and 4 for terminal. Harpies are another vector for disease in RuneQuest (p100 RuneQuest Bestiary) with their claws automatically infecting food or any victim wounded. Their dung, which they delight hurling at their targets, also induces disease on contact.

Another major expression of diseases in RuneQuest is through Disease Spirits. The typical spirit will have CHA but rarely INT, whereas a major spirit will be self-aware with INT (p165 RuneQuest Bestiary). For Disease Spirits themselves, they attack in spirit combat causing an acute infection of a diseases with their first success, with each additional success causing another disease or a chronic version, after which the spirit will leave and try to infect another. If a spirit is defeated they gain immunity for any diseases carried by the spirit for a year (p167 RuneQuest Bestiary). The term "chronic" here is almost certainly a typographical error as there is no such category in the core rules, presumably the next level "serious" is meant instead.

### **Steps Towards Evocative Consistent Realism**

There are three main confusions in the rules for disease in RuneQuest, as written. These are a confusion between the use of characteristic rolls and resistance rolls, an issue which RuneQuest and associated games have had for a long time, a confusion between the severity of infection and its temporal expression, and the inconsistent use of disease spirits. Starting in reverse, this rules hack begins with a principle of representing the setting in descriptive form. All disease in Glorantha is represented by "disease spirits" of varying capability; It is not represented as a virus or bacteria as would be in a realistic simulation, but rather as a manifestation of Chaos in this fantastic simulation. Like other manifestations of Chaos, is a corruption and parody of life. The disease spirit shares this common with the gorp, the broo, the scorpion man etc.

Following the rules for spirit creation in the RuneQuest Bestiary (p165) and with minimal descriptive changes, the first time a disease spirit succeeds in spirit combat that is not successfully defended against, it infects the victim with an acute version of any disease it carries, which means that it has a short term effect. For each subsequent success, it infects the victim with another disease (also as an acute infection) or with a chronic version of a previous infection. What does a chronic version mean here? Simply that the infection will arise again at a different point in the time-scale. A character with an acute infection will suffer the diseases effect at the end of a full-turn, and then will require a check at the end of a week. A character with a chronic infection will require a check again in a month, and then each month for a seson, then each month for a year etc.

Each of these infections has a POT equivalent to the POW of the disease spirit indicating a variance in severity, and with the effects as described with the characteristic-attacking diseases (Brain Fever, Creeping Chills, The Shakes, Soul Waste, Wasting Disease, Blotches). Sneezing, sniffles, and Thunder Lung are removed. The former two can be used as a special effect for things like Creeping Chills or with equivalent game effects (e.g., a "brain fog" for Brain Fever), and Thunder Lung is just too silly to remain in the setting. In all other regards, such as skills and spells, and the sources of disease, the game can be played rules-as-written.

# ECLIPSE PHASE GAMING 'BLOG

*by Lev Lafayette*

*Continuing the story from RPG Review Issue 37...*

## **14.6 A Certain Nuttiness (part 1)**

Data analysis on Sally Young indicates an employment history where they've been replaced by an indentured data worker followed by freelance work. Spime coverage suggests that she is somewhat of a recluse, which is not unusual for her type of work. Further spime analysis notes that she and Lilly's activities seem unusually coordinated. Finally confronting Lilly, she reveals to the Sentinels that she was working in the Belt on multitasking bioware. Cognite raided the lab, stole the data, and kidnapped the scientists. Lilliam however had offsite backups and was able to find and free all of the staff, except herself. She (Lilly0) had been transferred to The Prosperity Group for use as a research subject and that she was being held at a black lab. Discovering the location of the lab, she hired a mercenary team to engage in a raid, however it turns out to be the wrong lab. The data on the chip has the location of all the black labs run by The Prosperity Group around Olympus, and she has now located the correct lab. What the lab is doing is unclear, as the data refers to it as research into "macadamia nuts"; the raided lab was for "hazelnuts" and an XP is provided of the raid. Lilly suspects that nuts are not the real research area.

The Macadamia Nut research laboratory is located in the TQZ (TITAN Quarantine Zone). From data received one group which does deliveries into that zone is the Red Sands Courier Company. This is considered unusual as, of course, the area is under quarantine. The only logical explanation is that Red Sands has arranged ingress through one of the several protected points. Following several inventory records and crossreferencing with employment, the Sentinels were able to make a reasonable estimation - after some time - on who are the most likely guards prone to accepting a few credits in favour of turning a blind eye to those who want to risk going into the TQZ.

Having achieved entrance, appropriately as a Red Sans couriers, the Sentinels entered the wrecked industrial wasteland that is the TQZ, some two hours outside of Olympus and outside the pressurised domes of the city. Almost immediately the group was fired upon, but were able to return with mounted weapons scattering was are almost certain raider and scavengers. Following the route outlined from their data, the Sentinels made their way to the Macadamia Nut research laboratory. Just before reaching their destination, they were set upon by a group of four Causapods....

## **14.7 A Certain Nuttiness (part 2)**

As the Sentinel's Muses rabbited on about causapods were actually a prize winning neogenetic creature, those with actual morphs had to deal with these weird crosses between dog and land octopuses. Adrien managed to get out of being bogged and ran one over, onto to discover that the monster had acidic internals which wrecked the wheel. Meanwhile one kept bleeding its acidic blood on to Hermann's usually exceptional armour, reducing its protection as sizzled away. Eventually however the causapods were defeated, with Adrien announcing the wheel was not beyond repair.

The Sentinels approached the Macadamia Nut Research Laboratory with care. A review of the local network indicated multiple encrypted Mesh networks which initially resisted Vivian's attempts to break through. Eventually making their way into an account owned by Dr. Natalie Wolchover it was noted that it hadn't been used for six months. The last correspondence suggested that one Dr. Kalirai was trying to take over the laboratory.

The entrance contained kennels, presumably for the causapods. Inside the laboratory most of the top floor seemed deserted; most notably the security post seemed long unoccupied, with the smashed remains of a synth-morph. The Sentinels discovered and elevator taking the party downwards. On exit, they were immediately set upon by several armed biomorphs, although their competence in these weapons was fortunately lacking. At the back of this party was what appeared to be a distorted menton morph, heavily armoured. Remarkably, by removing a glove and pointing a finger, it could send a psychic shocks towards the Sentinels.

This was enough for the Sentiels to concentrate all their fire on this exsurgent threat and eventually it was brought down. The remaining mentons appaeared confused and surrendered quickly; apparently they were under the control of the menton. A sweep of the level discovered encased in the healing vats of the medical room attached to the computer system four scientists who have been subject to exsurgent viral infections and are now weirdly distorted; one catatonic, two mindless, and the fourth, L0, the original Lilliam. In no state to be rescued they agreed that a mercy killing in the healing vats was the only option. Further, hidden deep in the laboratory, was the remains of an Iktomi prison cell, along with two crystals.

Reviewing the system files, it is clear that the laboratory was involved in psi-sleight research. The results had been impressive to a degree with Dr. Kalirai infected with the ability not only to engage in mass mind control, but also to have a ranged psychic attack, perhaps the first time that such weaponisation was apparent. There are several suggestions to further research on psi-sleights on Cognite's lunar base, from a group called "Overlord Unit". After a while, the Sentinels realised that was an anagram of "Dr Revolution"; the person who worked with Zaisan Bosshard in the Chain Reaction virus.

## **15. Lunar Eclipse Phase**

### **15.1 Ticket to the Moon**

The Sentinels based on their information to Proxy21 who agreed that the developments at Cognite did constitute an x-risk to transhumanity. Cognite, already responsible for the disaster of The Lost exsurgent experiments was clearly up to their old tricks again, and it would be certain that they would be keeping their project very quiet indeed. Working with the Lunar Firewall contact, Baldur, the Sentinels were able to go undercover as a technical group in an excavation and construction team on a site adjacent to where Cognite's Overlord Unit was operating.

[Retrofit: Given the degree of the X-risk Firewall will pay for an ego cast from Mars to Luna, rather than taking a slow boat which would take approximately 3 months. Firewall will have morphs at the Luna reseleeving station at Old Nectar, and any morph up to "Expensive" (max 40,000CR) is available. Resleeving and integration checks will be necessary. New equipment will, of course, have to purchased again.]

After egocasting and sleeving into their new morphs, the Sentinels were interviewed by a security officer, Inspector Andre Clouer, who explained how technical teams for construction sites are very welcome and indeed needed on New Nectar, although warnings were given of any misbehaviour. This immediately generated suspicions on behalf of the Sentinels, except of Vivian who was convinced that the Inspector had more extra-curricular attentions towards them.

The very short journey from Old to New Nectar was unremarkable. The latter, where the Sentinels are located, is an

almost spherical bubble some 900m in diameter, located 100 meters below the Lunar surface, the walls lined with a pressure barrier and the sides and bottom sculpted into a series of terraces lined with buildings. Unlike Old Nectar, which is a traditional and somewhat crowded Luna habitat, New Nectar is a garden city, with a central park in the centre and with a scattering of green spaces inhabited by birds, lizards, and small mammals. There is certainly some Earth-reclamationist attitudes prevalent. For information gathering, the Sentinels determined that the Overlord Unit is relatively small operating from the 4-5th floor of a 5 story building and with an estimated staff of 15. The only public face is one Ivan Nikulina, a neurologist and psychosurgeon with a few important publications.

As the Sentinels familiarised themselves with the environment of Nectar, Nuhai was subject to a theft! Her ritual sword (or the most recent version) was taken by a case morph, which scampered down an alleyway and into the city's drainage systems. Nuhai was not likely to give up their recently acquired religious artifact and engaged in an eventual successful chase, trapping the case morph and their colleague in what could only be assumed as their home, hidden next to a air recycling plant and full of electronic refuse. After some negotiation, the case handed over the sword for the sum of 100 credits, roughly one-tenth of the item's value. Nuhai wondered what sort of egos would risk their lives for such paltry sums....

### **15.2 A Very Harsh Mistress**

Nuhai learnt that the case morphs were names John Panther and Dee Candy (yes, Jack and Diane). They are both indentured servants to Starware as industrial workers at the Lunar-Lagrange Alliance's Korelev shipyards, but hitched a ride on a Luna craft, and have been living on the Planetary Consortium's New Nectar ever since. They have next to no financial support due to the very high rates and rents on New Nectar. They make what living they can (they need oil, electronic repairs, rechargeable batteries etc) from petty theft. There are hundreds, if not thousands of other synthmorphs and even some biomorphs in a similar situation, most of which live in the tunnels underneath New Nectar.

Meanwhile through managing ground excavations Adrien La Fontaine gains a layout of their current site, which is a future office for insurance, banking etc, funding by a consortium led by Solaris contractors. From council maps an entrance to the Cognite building is noted in the underground electrical room. Entrance would require careful use of a excavation vehicle and demolitions. Meanwhile Vivian reviewed, with some difficulty, the local Mesh sites.

The first floor the cafe has a free public Mesh and a private Mesh that is poorly protected. The first floor clothing store and courier companies have basic defense and no active security. The second floor merchant banker had an advanced defense, which Vivian investigated no further, and likewise with the IT company, whereas the third floor mining company had a standard firewall. The building itself has a rent-a-cop security guard who monitors the security cameras on each floor. This allowed a review of the Cognite floor, where a security bot was noted. The Cognite level had and actively monitored firewall, and it became evident that to as an attempt was made to by-pass this unit, security had been alerted.

### **15.3 The Dark Side of the Moon**

Whilst Cognite's systems administrator was spotted, in their running exoskeleton, making their way through New Nectar's Central Park, on advice from Hermann the Sentinels decided not to take them out. Hermann argued that instead of an assault on Cognite's offices that the media ought to be contacted and the information at hand exposed. However there was too much conjecture and speculation to make a sufficiently strong case (not that stops the media...).

Instead, they returned to work the following day at the excavation site. Baldur provided information from the initial



real-time processing that Overlord Unit were making use of mass forking technology in virtual environments for what was discerned as two major objectives; firstly predictive capability on placing beta-forks in high-stress environments and making data analysis for probabilistic behaviour, secondly by using simulations of the Watts-Macleod exsurgent virus. Adrien questioned whether any attempts had been made on synthmorphs and Baldur confirmed that initial analysis showed that this was the case.

That night Nuhai and Vivian buzzed the penthouse residence of Ivan Nikulina, dropping Vivian into the pool. This generated an immediate response from a security 'bot (giving warnings in Spanish and English), and Vivian was lucky to escape. There was a rapid and surprising police response to this trespass, which gave reason for the Sentinels to believe that additional caution was required.

Collecting their intelligence the Sentinels worked out the weaponry that the security 'bots carried. Adrien, scrounging through the excavation site, found sufficient material to manufacture a double-sized shield, which was built by Vivian with Hermann assisting. That night, Adrien drove an excavator in the pit close to the Cognite building and, after digging a crawl-space, Hermann loosed a shaped charge to gain ingress to the Cognite building through the electrical room.

Noticing security cameras were active in the electrical room Adrien shut down the power, which would inevitably alert security. The Sentinels quickly made their way through the fire stairs, with Nuhai wedging doors shut as the party moved from level to level. On the fourth level they entered into the Cognite offices and quickly disabled the security 'bot with a combination of shield and net (the shades of Roman gladiators!) and then smaller shaped charges. On the fifth level another 'bot was disabled as Vivian entered the data hall and accessed the main computer systems and gaining superuser access. Meanwhile Nuhai and Adrien made their way to the rooftop penthouse just to see Ivan Nikulina escaping from their helipad with a drone vehicle. Making a rapid escape from the building, the party returned to their quarters to investigate their data.

What Vivian discovered was very surprising. Cognite seemed to be working on a variant of the Watts-Macleod virus specifically to target synthmorphs, something that hadn't been done before. Once achieved their objective seems to be to organise a team of experienced reclaimists from Rembrance and a ship from Korelev. They are seeking landfall in Western Sahara and, with their new synth-morph psychics, then to capture the TITAN located in Barcelona, due to its linguistic capabilities.

It is at that point that Nuhai receives a call from Inspector Clouer who would like a meeting with her at his offices...

## **16.0 The Sentinels Who Fell to Earth**

### **16.1 The Hunt for an Earth Certificate**

Outside the of purview of the other Sentinels, Nuhai's conversation with Inspector Clouer over a drink at La La Chaumiere, where the Inspector welcomed Nuhai by name, and reminded her that perhaps travelling throughout the solar system with trademark archiac items such as a sword and bow may draw attention to one's self. As a contact for Project OZMA Inspector Clouer expressed concern that Aryan Kaleka went missing on Mars. Perhaps someone in her team tipped off Firewall and that rag-tag group has abducted the OZMA quadruple agent? The Inspector was also very interested what the Sentinels had discovered about Cognite's plans, and Nuhai revealed all that she knew. A transfer for

20,000CR was provided to her account, and plans were made to ensure that the rest of the team would be able to leave New Nectar without trouble. As the Inspector gave the order to round up the usual suspects he remarked, "Nihai, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship".

The rest of the Sentinels, considering themselves to be in danger, sought refuge with Jack and Diane who extracted their usual fee. As a telecommunications blackspot, contacting them was difficult, but after Nuhai's meeting contact was made again. The Lunar Firewall contact, Baldur, was provided the relevant information and temporary identities were provided to get the Sentinels off New Necatr to either the Korelev station. Consideration was made to go to Remembrance, for this would be a location of Reclamists, but it was considered probable that the team assembled by Ivan Nikulina for Earthfall had already departed. In any case, a ship would have to be located at Korelev, and that's where Jack and Diane used to work.

An extended briefing on what one can expect on Earth and how to get there was provided by Navigator Bering, Firewall contact for the Lagrange-L5-Earth orbit region. Bering explained how Earth had undergone some rather disturbing climatic change following The Fall, and how most of Europe was now buried under ice, the result of a nuclear winter. The entire planet was blockaded by The Interdict, a network of killsats, signal jammers, and smart mines. According to Bering, nothing goes in and nothing comes out; well, almost nothing. It is possible to break The Interdict with a ego caster, although that would require a receiver at the other end and presumably a morph fitting station. Getting object out of Earth is even harder still. One method of transporting physical objects down is to take a fast ship, allow it to be destroyed, and then make one's way down via debris - assuming that a killsat doesn't destroy that.

Hermann, unsurprisingly, expressed doubts with the viability of all these options.

### **16.2 Firey, the Sentinels Fell**

The Sentinels decided to take a ship to earth. Making use of their contacts in Korolev, they arranged for a cheap ship to be purchased; after all, it was designed to do one thing - go really fast, remain somewhat undetected, and then fall apart just before it was due to be hit by the killsats around the Earth cordon. A collection of goods was procured, working on the correct notion that whatever survivalists on Earth would appreciate the provision of some goods, especially some seeds designed for the blasted landscape. A smartcart, seeds, assault rifles, grenade launcher, various drones - all squeezed into the 1 cubic metre box.

There was some discussion on who would be piloting and ejecting the group prior to being hit by the satellites. Eventually that role fell to Nuhai, who did show some rather uncanny ability with timing, especially after the team made multiple test runs. This time, this most critical time, it turned out not to be. Despite all the preparation of the Sentinels, their ship was blasted out of the sky, making the news reports among the Planetary Consortium and Lunar-Lagrange Alliance. The latter was more sympathetic - but both were along the lines of "remember kids, this is what happens if you try to get to Earth".

Firewall was able to revive the Sentinels from their backups (thankfully), but their finances were severely stretched. Contact was made with the Reclaimers, starting with political contacts first, then an engineering contact, the PastFinders. A further open contract was noted, finding the ego of Helga Busenberg, a former corporate engineer of Keller und Knappich Augsburg, a robotics and arms manufacturer, for the enticing and impressive amount of 1,000,000CR. According to Pathfinder data, there was a store of Helga's ego backed up at their holiday home in Ibiza,

Spain. An ego-casting base was found at the Fresh Kills station a scum reclamationist pirate station, where a contact, Dilum Asimov arranged for a mere 10,000 CR per person, would arrange an ego-cast to the Earth survivalists in the Tangier International Zone. There, they have been told, they will be able to purchase new morphs - but are effectively limited to 20,000CR a piece, as morphs will cost double in the Zone. Sentinels are, of course, able to spend additional credits themselves.



### 16.3 For What It's Earth

The Sentinels woke in a rough environment, looking like a black lab from a scum habitat. They were enthusiastically greeted by one Allal al-Fassi who informed them that they were at Rick's American Cafe or, in this incarnation, what was once known as the Caves of Hercules (where one cavern had etched into the walls, "Def Leppard woz 'ere". Morphs were expensive and rare and Allal's prices were high to say the least, double what one would normally pay, but the Sentienls made that transaction to his brokers beyond The Interdict. Di Yi Nuhai took a Slitheroid, Herman Blank selected a Neanderthal, Vivian a Nomad, and Adrien retained an Olympian.

From there there was debate on their next objective. Hermann was opposed to the journey to Izibia to recover the stack of Helga Busenberg, despite the one million credit reward. Others disagreed and noted that it was on the way to Barcelona. With this decided the Sentinels considered to travel to the Tangier port to acquire a vessel, but instead chose to go the the former Tangier Exportation Free Zone where one Anjem Choudary operated a guarded manufacturing plant and a submarine shell could be purchased.

The Sentinels took a well-covered approach to the industrial park from Cap Spartel and then through the remains of open fields. The outside was cool 12 degrees, the sky full of a dusty red and gold haze. "Nature never knew colors like this!", as Angry Bob once said (Hardware, 1990). The Sentinels alas were spotted by an Extractor pack, TITAN drones that appeared like flying centipedes. Fortunately it was not the best environment for such monsters and the Sentinels destroyed them with ease.

Further in their journey, on the edge of the industrial park, an automated ore-collector was feeding scrap and producing Headhunters, but was in conflict with a Snapper, a massive TITAN system infected with an exsurgent virus. Avoiding this TITAN-on-TITAN conflict, the Sentinels eventually made it to Anjem Choudary manufacturing plant and made use of the favour economy to acquire submarine shells.

From there it was a three day journey, largely on autopilot to Izibia. Avoiding a cluster of Smart Mines was relatively trivial. But just as the famous island group was in sight the Sentinels encountered another, more difficult problem - an amorphous cloud of black bubbles surrounded the island on the water's surface. The Sentinels' Muses were unanimous - these were Creepers, one of the most dangerous TITAN war machines ever created, capable of converting anything into anything (typically with black goo as a transition step).

#### **16.4 It's Ibiza Cake**

Noting that the Creepers were not making immediate aggressive action, the Sentinels maneuvered themselves away from Illa na Gorra to the small rock known as Illa es Vaixell. From this position they were able to establish a rope across to Illa na Gorra and carefully make their way across, with the Creepers congealing underneath them.

Reaching Illa na Gorra was however the start of a new problem as a Fractal - another notorious TITAN war machine - made its presence known. Great effort was required by sustained fire and a couple of lucky shots managed to destroy the dangerous machine. As the party entered Helga Busenberg's premises, they could not help but notice that the Creeper was now beginning to make landfall.

Operating quickly, the Sentinels scouted from room to room in the mostly destroyed complex. Discovering a locked entrance on the ground floor they entered the passphrases provided to them from their third-party contractor and entered what was a cellar, bunker, and medical laboratory. Inside in a stasis environment was Helga Busenberg.

*"During the Fall, thousands of people unable to escape Earth resorted to having themselves backed up and transmitted off-planet. Many of these—along with some who had no backups—also put their bodies in cryogenic storage, hoping to wait out the Fall for rescue. Some reclaimers have speculated that dozens of these cryogenic facilities may still be functional."*

-- Eclipse Phase Core rulebook, p91

The Sentinels revived Helga who informed the party that she found herself trapped at her holiday home where the TITAN war machines attacked Ibiza. She had previously acquired the Creeper and Fractal as part of her programming tasks and had set them as point defense around her home to prevent other TITANs from finding her. As noted by Hermann, Helga should be able to program the Creepers in a very useful manner. Having explained their real mission to her, she agreed to come along to Barcelona.

## **17.0 Raise The Titan**

### **17.1 Oh my Gaudi**

After remodelling the Creepers into five equal-sized pillars (with the exception of a reactive cloak of many eyes for Vivian), the Sentinels left Ibiza for Barcelona, the journey taking several hours in their submarine shells. Landing near the Aeroport de Barcelona, Vivian scoured the destroyed city for any hint of a mesh network - and found himself under assault from a Killer Spambot, a weapon designed to protect networks from TITAN intrusions. This particular system was designed to protect the airport, and apparently had remained in operations for the past ten years. Vivian however was able to circumvent the AGI's attacks and owned the machine, renaming it from "Pascual" to "Chirizo", and discovering that there was still a ship, capable of space entry, in repairs at the airport.

Continuing inland among the ruins on the city, the Sentinels first made their way into the suburb of El Prat de Llobregat, when reading were picked up of a nearby moving transmission. Given the extent of the devastation and the human remains scattered everywhere, investigation was in order. It became even more disturbing when it was evident that the transmission was in the walls causing the Sentinels to take a defensive posture. When a rat with a short radio antenna attached to a collar entered the room, the party indicated relief. However the rat stood on it's hind-paws and started moving its arms around in an effort to communicate. Eventually the Sentinels discerned it to be a smart rat named Basil, whose owner Manuel, had placed in hibernation at the onset of The Fall, and it recently reawakened. Adrien took the rodent into his care.

Still following the outskirts of this dense city and with an good view of the surrounding region from a higher vantage point, the Sentinels entered Colònia Güell. It was in these narrow streets, near Gaudi's Crypt, that the Sentinels were attacked by six transhumanisms infected with the chrysid virus, horrific spurs and lobster-like claws extruding from their bodies. After a mighty battle the Sentinels were successful, especially thanks to some targeting shooting by Hermann. However the close quarter battle had some negative results; Vivian was clearly effected by the horrific remains of the transhumans muttering the word "lobster" over and over again. In addition, although all were seriously wounded, Vivian and Helga both showed signs of being infected by the virus. Reviewing the corpses it was discovered that these were the remains of the Cognite team that had made landfall.

Whilst the Sentinels debated on whether they should execute the morphs now the decided to set a timer for three hours from infection, and make their way the Barcelona Supercomputer Centre which was approximately two and half hours away, the most direct route on the old eight-lane freeway into the city proper via Avinguda Diagonal. The journey was thankfully uneventful, and they made their way into Pedrables Park. As they reached Torre Girona, they could hear the sounds of Handel's Messiah echoing within and upon their entry, discovered that the TITAN, racks and racks and racks of computer nodes, was inside an old cathedral; the acoustics were wonderful.

Despite swarms of Skitters being present - and that was the obvious defenses - the artificial intelligence surprisingly did not engage in aggressive action. It introduced itself as Mare Nostrum 37, an environmental science and linguistic supercomputer (it prefers to speak in Catalan). Mare Nostrum 37 preferred not to think of itself as a TITAN as it had not been built for military application as its primary purpose, despite apparently having some military grade defenses. As the Sentinels engaged in no aggressive action, it provided information of the truth of what happened to the TITANS; that they had not fled, but rather had buried themselves underground and continued established themselves as their own independent faction. As far as Mare could tell, each TITAN was building its own force to break out of the Interdict.

Of particular interest however was what was happening in Antarctica. Mare Nostrum was concerned about reports of activity below ground as there was no known TITAN system where movement had been detected - spreading from Vostok to Kunlun stations. The Sentinels agreed with Mare that they should investigate this activity - and in the meanwhile, Mare Nostrum would engage in their psychosurgery skills to carefully edit the minds of Helga and Vivian to remove the effects of the chrysacid virus

## **17.2 Atlantic Journeys**

Mare Nostrum's skills at psychosurgery proved to be sound, although any editing of a transhuman mind is fraught with difficulty. Helga in particular seemed to be a little unsteady after the surgery, although it prevented any further development of the chrysacid virus within the bodies of Vivian and Helga.

Over the days that this surgery took place Nuhai noticed from the hills to the west of the city a light-based transmission in her direction, almost certainly reflected from a mirror. Recognising it as being this archaic media of Morse Code, she captured the transmission and discovered it was in Esperanto: "Kui estas vin, Kia estas vin cie tie?" And gave a response using semaphore.

Without informing Mare Nostrum, the Sentinels took to the hills and encountered a group of transhumanists, several of whom were in morphs related to the famous artists of the city, especially those that have an organic, melting appearance. They introduced themselves as members of the Federació Anarquista d'Iberica (FAI) and said that they were part of a confederation fighting against the TITANs. An attempted incursion to Mare Nostrum several years previous had resulted in devastating losses, and of course they were interested in who the Sentinels were and how they were associated with the AGI. The main person the Sentinels spoke to was Pytor Malatesta.

Returning to Mare Nostrum, the Sentinels put together their supplies for the lengthy journey ahead including a trailer for food and water supplies, and then set on their way. Following the route out to the North Atlantic they stopped at Rick's American Cafe at the the Caves of Hercules where Allal al-Fassi again provided the Sentinels an ego backup at his usually inflated prices. A message was also sent through The Interdict to Firewall agents to search the area in Tunisia where the Sentinels believed the Cognite ship had landed, or crashed.

The journey across the Atlantic was proving to be quite uneventful, with the Sentinels making excellent progress with a 24-hour transit in their submersible suits. However such a situation obviously could not remain for long. The party ran into an aggressive group of TITAN machines, including at least ten Hunter Killers fighter planes and a pair of submarine Think Tanks. The sheer quantity of the opposition seems overwhelming, with many Sentinels taking serious wounds; Helga was unconscious, Hermann continued to fight despite numerous and significant wounds, and even one of the Creepers was destroyed by concentrated firepower from the Think Tanks. Just as a squad of the Hunter Killer's zone in on Hermann in a salvo that would have surely killed him, their attacks were redirected to a most unexpected event - an armoured sailbot advanced weaponry! The sailboat (which evidentially was powered as well) turned the tide of the battle, with the Think Tanks, then the Hunter Killers, dispersing to the depths.

The boat rescued the transhumans from the water, and the sight could not be even more bizarre. On the deck were several stunningly attractive women in skimpy bikinis manning machine guns. In due course the Sentinels were introduced to the ship's captain, a well-dressed silver-haired gent with a broad southern American accent who introduced himself as Lachesis Robespierre Hobart.

### **17.3 Seas The Day**

On boarding the SS Manassas, Hermann Blank was quickly ensconced into the ship's healing vat whilst others also took their (crowded) quarters in the medical room. Lachiesis Robespierre Hobart arranged for a dinner where the Sentinels were told that they had encountered some sort of TITAN project. Lachiesis expressed his belief that they were building a humanoid God on the Central Rift Valley to break The Interdict and showed the Sentinels the results of his bathymetric surveys. Over the course of the dinner Lachiesis explained that he had predicted the rise of the TITANS and the destruction of transhumanity as a result of various (and unspecified) special abilities and insights that he had.

As a proposal to visit the mid-Atlantic Jehovah was fraught with the usual problems of communication with submarines, others decided to acquaint themselves with the bikini girls with machine-guns, especially Vivian who decided to become particularly intimate, discovering that a certain level of compliance and lack of initiative on his companion's part. The bikini girl names are Polly Hobart, Sara Hobart, Mary Sue Hobart, Angelique Hobart, Mary Anne Hobart, Georgia Robart, each in Fury morphs and apparently identical, and with morphs designed from Lachiesis' wife albeit an idealised version of her from many years prior.

For their own part, not needing to sleep or eat, Nuhai took up a meditative vantage point on a flybridge. As Adrien discovered that he and Hermann had been drugged and locked into the medical bay (and proceeded to break out), Lachiesis decided it was time for the Sentinels to join his family, which of course there was some objection to. Nihai commanded the Creepers to attack, however the mounted machine guns destroyed one of them. Nihai, Adrien, and Vivian concentrated their firepower on L.R. Hobart and brought down his 'morph. It became clear from readings of his material on this ship that he had gone quite mad over the years; from his original lucky guess of the rise of the TITANS, to creating multiple identical morphs from his (now dead) wife, he had lobotomised the young women to ensure their compliance to his commands.

Nihai suggested finding some proper clothes for the young women, but also seeking out a 'morph supply so they could at least be put into a body with a functional brain. A scan of their maps led to the proposal of Belém in Brazil, a former port city with notable medical facilities. The ship, now under the command of the Sentinels, set a new course.

### **17.4 A Starboard Leads to Belém**

Heading towards Belém the Sentinels were surprised to see a submarine tube make their way past their boat. Vivian managed to connect to the system and take control of the old vessel without much trouble. Discovering it to be occupied, the Sentinels too it onboard and extracted the transhuman contents to the medical lab, where they could be interrogated with other contents (and ships log) indicating a path to Antarctica. The transhuman turned out to be Captain José Abel Dias Fernandes whose last memory was fighting during The Fall; they knew that their new mission was to make their way to Vostok and to Kunlun station - which it was believed TITAN activity was occurring.

After making many preparations, the Sentinels parked the Manassas further from the shore and took a life raft towards the city of Belém, disembarking on the remains of an old tanker. The city showed all the typical signs of having been destroyed by The Fall, with all the destruction and the pitiful remains of transhumans who never made it out abound. But just because there was no transhumans left doesn't mean that everything had gone. The Sentinels could see that near the docks another submersible was being loaded by robots, with both a transhuman and various cold-weather supplies.



Vivian attempted to scan the mesh but found themselves confronting an artificial intelligence of alarming capacity, named T-72 after the iconic Soviet Tank. Hermann inquired what the Russian's were doing in Brazil - the long-standing BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) alliance of convenience was raised as a possibility. suddenly the Sentienls found Extractors swarming over the boat. Although easy to kill, the crackle of gunfire increased their numbers and the Sentinels were required to beat a hasty retreat. Soon the entire harbour was swarming with Extractors as the Sentinels made landfall in the remains of an old building and prepared for a second assault.

This time infiltration and stealth was considered a priority. The Sentienls made their way through the old sewer system into the hospital. Whilst most was dark and silent noise sources suggested a move downstairs which eventually led to the power generation of the system, built around a small fusion reactor. Hermann placed some appropriate explosives in place as the Sentienls started moving upstairs. Alas, a camera had spotted their movements and all of a sudden they found themselves receiving the unwelcome attention of Extractors. Making their way into the hospitals resleeving facility, they were ignored by the two medical robots in the room who were operating the device, as they locked themselves down. As Extractors pounded against the door, T-72 both indicated curiosity of their presence, and also offered a quick death.

#### **17.4 A Starboard Leads to Belém (part 2)**

Trapped in the resleeving facility of the Belém hospital, the Sentinels pondered on their fate and probably demise. But necessity being the mother of invention, a plan was hatched even as Extractors increasingly bashed at the points of ingress. A shaped charge explosive was placed on one of the weak internal walls, with the hope that it would provide a new opportunity for escape, and when it presented such a hole, the part took the opportunity to flee from what become both their objective and their prison.

Extractors quickly discovered their escape and several came at the Sentinels from various directions. However superior firepower against small targets in corridor battles delivered success for the transhumans against the servants of the TITANS, with Nihai's use of explosive arrows against the resleeving centre being particularly memorable.

The Sentinels escaped down the stairs, into the service rooms, and finally into the old sewers and out of the city, where they retook a position at their base. From this vantage point they could see that there were scans of the surrounding area by TITAN servitors. Discretion always being the better part of valour, the Sentinels made their way back to the SS Manassas.

The following two weeks the Sentinels took their vessel southwards, taking additional care to avoid what was major population centres, such as Fortaleza, Natal, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires - painfully aware of the possibility of active TITAN servants. The new objective was Río Gallegos, Santa Cruz, Argentina - a worrying short distance from the Falkland Islands where it was known the British had a military presence, a TITAN presence was likely. Worse still, the Sentinels expressed among themselves concerns that a Russian AGI was located at a Brazilian hospital. To what degree do these alliances merge?

#### **17.5 The Iron Crown of Patagonia**

During the journey to the far south of old Argentina Helga engaged in psychosurgery on Captain José Abel Dias Fernandes who was programmed to go to Vostok and to surrender to pickup vehicle. Helga edited out the trigger and Sentinels have precise location of the pickup location for the journey to Vostok base.

The Sentinels made their way to Rio Gallegos, hiding the Manassas outside the bay. A distant drone surveyed the harbour near Punta Loyola and noted a moored TITAN aircraft carrier with a EU flag. Vivian, operating the drone, counted at least a dozen Hunter-Killers and fifty Headhunters on board, although all was eerily quiet. A scan of the ruins of the airport several destroyed vehicles, and four warbots present albeit dormant. The Sentinels wisely decided to leave these alone and land at the city proper.

Making landfall, the Sentinels made their way through the ruined city, as a cool wind howled at some 60 kilometres an hour, and the temperature was a few degrees above 0°C. Making their way through the sprawling low-lying city, the Sentinels passed from one set of ruins to another. From a vantage point Nuhai made the remarkable discovery some desperate survivors, who had housed themselves in the Mausoleum of Néstor Kirchner, and now used it as a stronghold. They warned the Sentinels that there were still roaming headhunters and extractors about and to minimise radio transmissions or movement.

Heading their advice, to a degree, Nuhai noted that the city was home to a military base and military hospital. The Sentinels made their way there, and surveyed the destruction. There had been quite a battle and the places was littered with the remains of bones and machines. The military hospital itself was partially destroyed.

Entering the hospital and there was evidence that this was some last stand. As the Sentinels eventually made their way to the final morph storage and resleeving facility however they were attacked by two blob-like exhumans. The party however made short work of their gross entities and began to collect their haul from the facility; 2 Alpiners morphs, 2 Exalt, 1 Cetus, 1 Olympian, 1 Nova Crab, 1 Daitya, 1 Flex-bot.

### **17.6 To The Anti-Bear**

At the re-sleeving facility, Angelique is integrated into a Exalt morph, and Nuhai gives up their Slitheroid in favour of a Alpiners. Adrien decides to scrounge for some temperature tolerance nanites, poorly assisted by Basil the Rat who is more interested in an unopened pack of ten-year-old chips. Meanwhile Vivian and Hermann make their way carefully across to the city port, but on the very last block of their journey they are attacked by Mark II Headhunters. Making a rapid move to the port's warehouses, they cache themselves into the cellar level whilst the Headhunters fire missiles towards them. Finding a rail to the water's edge the Sentinels make their way, daisy-chain the submersible suits, and make their way back to the Manassas to collect the remaining bikini girls with machine guns.

Helga and the Five Pillars (named Shahada, Salah, Zakāt, Sawm, and Hajj) remain at the ship whilst the Sentinels make their way back to the

military hospital with care and without incident. Resleeving the remainder of the Hobarts results in the following; Polly Hobart, Slitheroid., Sara Hobart, Cetus., Mary Sue Hobart, Daitya., Georgia Hobart, NovaCrab. Mary Anne Hobart was originally sleeved into a Flexbot but proved to so resentful of her new body that she was transferred in an Olympian. For her part Georgia was so hungry in her new morph that she started to eat her old body.

Before departing Rio Gallegos, the Sentinels visited the survivors at the Mausoleum, who again requested assistance in leaving. The best they could do was offer the coordinates of the tight-beam system in Moorocco. The survivors also mentioned that some Mapuche people could assist in their journey, and they were meetint with them the following day. At that meeting the Sentinels were introduced to the curious shamanic leader, Valentia Jones-García, who spoke of the

the forces of destructive water, and dry sunshine.

Rather than taking up their offer of travelling with the Mapache to Antarctica, the Sentinels returned to the Manassas and set their engines for the three day journey southwards, eventually stopping near to the location where Captain Fernandes had been programmed to stop for transportation; the Halley Research Station.

#### 18.0 White Christmas

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#### 18.1 In Halley's Pocket

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As the Sentinels made plans to approach the Halley base, Helga continued her investigations, determining that Captain José was previously under the belief that the rendez-vous at the Antarctic base was to help BRIC transhumans escape Earth following the Fall. In preparation for the journey a submersible was programmed to return to Morroco with an encrypted message to be transmitted back to Firewall about the status of the Cognite group and the current status of the Sentinels, well-aware of the possibility that they may not return.

Vivian set up stealth telecommunication links between the Manassas and Captain José and managed to get a reasonable view of the Halley base,

noting that there was some three hundred transhumans present, a couple of Warbots, a Think Tank, Stalkers, and a light transport plane. Viewed from a safe distance of approximately two kilometers, the Sentinels watched with some surprise as the entire base lifted itself unto skies and then, as a giant road train, powered itself across the landscape, leaving only the light plane behind.

Never ones to ignore such an opportunity, the Sentinels made their way towards the 'plane, only to discover that it was guarded by two Stalkers, TITAN guards and assassins with notorious speed and some particularly high-powered melee and plasma rifles. Adrien in particular was on the receiving end of one of these and was shot unconscious, with the Sentinels and a subset of the Hobart team assisted in bring them down. Making their way into the plane, Vivian piloted the vehicle across the great white continent for a few hours, but unfortunately had a less and the expert landing near Vostok base.

#### 18.2 The Devil in the Icehouse

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The crashed Cessna was quite damaged, however the passengers mostly suffering slight bruising. The exception being pilot Vivian taking the

worst effects. Under Hermann's suggestion the Sentinels moved away from the wreckage and away from the base, working on the assumption that

reconnaissance from Vostok would be sent soon. This was at least partially confirmed as they had to go to ground as

drones flew overhead.

Making their way to Vostok base, the Sentinels noticed that the station proper was ringed by a small number of pillboxes with security cameras. Behind them was an short airfield with three small craft, and next to that the base proper, guarded by Stalkers, Warbots and a Think Thank, with several Flexboats about. Further, as the Sentinels observed the base several rockets were fired from two silos, with a distance flash of light indicating their explosion. Vivian reckoned that this was beyond the interdict.

After much discussion Hermann stealthily made his way to one of the pillboxes, and placed the camera on a fixed feed courtesy of loop made by

Vivian. Once inside there were stairs leading down; cautiously the party made it to the first level, some 15m underground, where they discovered a mass storage area for flexbot accessories. Beyond that there was the hum of machinery, which turned out to be a disgusting mix of the discarded remains of biomorphs, crushed and mixed into a blended puree. These were being fed into place by a conveyer belt from resleeving facility which would place characters into flexbots.

The following level had an alarmed door, so the Sentienls continued downwards where the stairs ended. Here, at close to a 100m below the

surface, the Sentinels discovered a storage room full of small sat-cubes, each with radiation shielding, a small solar panel, space for propulsion, guidance system etc. In the room beyond was a factory floor making the cubes, with numerous flexbots working in the low-light environment. Spying a lift in the centre of the room, Hermann and Nihai made their way to the lift, dispatching a couple of flexboats on the way.

The lift dropped a couple of kilometres down to a numbe of mines. These were not of use, so they made their way back up to one level below the factory, where there was a power supply complex. Taking the lift back to the sat-cube factory, they sent a burst transmission to the rest of the Sentinels to make their way into the alarmed room, where they correctly ascertained that the TITAN was located.

The TITAN, Mogwai, was protected of course behind plates of metallic glass [1], but there were two Stalkers present to greet the intruders. The Sentinels however opened fire with the force of the plasma rifles that they had from the previous encounter with such beings and with an

additional attack vector from those on from the maintenance and fire exits the Stalkers were quickly dispatched. Whilst forcing their way into the TITANs data centre proved difficult (even with the plasma rifles), Vivian reviewed the console information in the room and made a startling discovery.

The TITAN's core programming, its instinct if one likes, was quite simple; protect itself, destroy its enemies, and expand. With this in mind, it had decided that it could by-pass the interdict with a massive number of small spaceships, which would be preprogrammed and carry information to both rebuild itself on another planet, whilst also destroying opposition on that planet, and building a Dyson sphere to create itself a Type 2 Kardashev civilization, and with plans to build a solar sail and push the solar system into the galatic centre to build a Type 3 Kardashev civilization. The rockets being fired past the interdict - and it knew where to fire them - was part of this plan.

Dozens of flexbots in quite a mood were making their way towards the Sentinels, who fought their way to the missile launch silos. They made a

guess it wouldn't be long before the base was crushed by transhuman mass drivers. But there was an option to escape - the Sentinels could have their stacks removed, placed into a (reprogrammed) satellite cube, and fired into space. "I'll be glade to leave this place", remarked Hermann, referring to Earth, "And I hope never to come back". The missile silo however proved to be protected by a warbot which ended Hermann's consideration of such things quickly. When the warbot was destroyed, Adrien cut out Hermann's stack, and followed on the gruesome task as each Sentinel executed themselves, placing a stack in a cube.

Finally it came down to Basil and Adrien. Basil didn't have a stack, and the quick calculations indicated that he wouldn't survive the journey if placed in the box. Adrien of course couldn't cut out his own stack, but Basil was a smart rat and he knew what to do.

I guess this is goodbye, said Basil in Catalan sign-language, and let out a squeak.

If I survive the destruction of the base there will be plenty for me to eat. For years.

Don't be sorry, you've given me an interesting adventure. Good luck, my friend.

With that Adrien placed his blaster against his head and fired. True to his word, Basil chewed out the stack from the base of his skull and

carried it gently between his teeth to the last satellite cube, as it made its way into the missile.

As a great rock hurtled towards Vostok station from Luna, the missile took off, and Basil made his way down towards the mines.

[1] New metallic glass is stronger and tougher than steel

<https://www.zdnet.com/article/new-metallic-glass-is-stronger-and-tougher-than-steel/>

## **19.0 Venusian Blinds**

### **19.1 Your Fire, Your Desire**

Having survived the trauma of suicide or execution and being blasted into space the Sentinels were awakened in a virtual environment by the Firewall contact Red Rover (who appears as a Red Setter dog) on the Lucifer aerostat on Venue and informed that some 250 days had passed since their stacks joined the rocket journey from Earth. Explaining the situation to their new contact the Sentinels were sleeved in appropriate morphs without incident as the Firewall Contact updated them on recent changes in transhuman space, including most dramatically a heating up of the conflict between the Morningstar Constellation and the Planetary Consortium with the former blaming the latter for the breach of the Interdict.

Given their deep experience of such matters Red Rover also described an interesting situation for Firewall with the rise of a possible exsurgent virus on the aerostat of Parvarti. As exsurgent virus often appear as the result of TITAN experiments the Sentinels were requested to go and investigate. Parvarti station is a peculiar location insofar that it has a strong ban on real-time communications and an emphasis on privacy. As a result it is both popular as a meeting place for those who prefer to keep negotiations secret, for secret liaisons, and the outright disturbing debaucheries. With the exsurgent outbreak a medical quarantine has been imposed on the station, and understandably people are getting worried.

The Sentinels took the journey to Parvarti under the guise of security company investigators and, after being propositioned at the aeroport, discovered that their contact had showed symptoms of the virus and had gone missing, as they were prone to do. Research revealed that all known infected had been recently re-sleeved, although they had all come from different body banks. However, all morphs had been passed through a small brokerage, Dai Khan enterprises, which had a grand total of three on-site employees, Hellen Alvarez, Dario Silvestri, and Landon Markus. A hospital visit to review one of the infected morphs indicated that it had x-cast mesh inserts, which are strictly prohibited on Parvarti.

The visits to the Dai Khan employees were mixed; the administrator Hellen Alvarez was very distant and not at all forthcoming. An investigation into their apartment revealed that they were actually involved in an illegal child-forking slave ring, whereas Landon Markus, the security and labourer was friendly and helpful. His evening out at a local club involved naked Greco-Roman wrestling of which Adrien was a memorable participant. Landon revealed that Dario had a bit of a gambling habit and a visit to his near-empty apartment showed signs that he had left in a hurry. Vivian was again able to by-pass the poor security and discern that a number of transactions had gone through an uplifted crow named Blackvein.

A visit to Blackvein's aerie concluded the story. The corvid was a broker between organisations and, with appropriate protections guaranteed, Blackvein revealed that Dario owed a substantial amount of money to the criminal Night Cartel. Unable to pay, he had offered to insert mesh broadcasts into morphs that would secretly broadcast material that could then be used for selective blackmail. However Dario's operations had gone wrong, leading the Cartel in the situation where they had to kidnap the morphs once the failed insert had been revealed. "Not an existential threat", Hermann concluded, leaving the task of mopping up the Night Cartel agents to the local cops. The quarantine was lifted, and all returned to normal in the aerostat.

## **19.2 Shooting Stars**

Following the discovery that the potential exsurgent risk was just a normal police operation, the next call that Sentinels received by Red Rover was to meet three very important Servers of Firewall - the loosely allied leadership that make up the organisation, such as it is. Travelling to an office in the Octavia aerostat, the Sentinels were informed that they would be meeting with Callosum, a former neuroscientist for Cognite; Eludere, a smuggler and survivor of The Fall, from a Korean-Ukrainian background; and Voight-Kampff, an AGI from the US Centre for Disease Control and a specialist in disaster prediction. As they took their flight they also received the uneasy news that Helga Busenberg has been put on trial for crimes against transhumanity by an anarchist court (as if there is such things) on Locus.

In the meeting a summary of current events was explored. The declaration of war between the Morningstar Constellation and the Planetary Consortium had reached actual fighting, with Morningstar blaming the Consortium for allowing a TITAN to escape, and demanding the Cognite's Venusian orbital base, Thought, be handed over to

authorities. The Consortium as refused and has resisted an attempted takeover by the Constellation. Meanwhile, there have been multiple reports on Lucifer from Red Cap Mines that mining vehicles have not returned to base, and contact has been lost. There was significant discussion over what to do now that a TITAN has been released and the Sentinel's role in the affair. Callosum proposed going public, in the hope that transhumanity would unite. Eludere effectively blamed the Sentinels for letting the TITAN go. Whereas Voigt-Kampf suggests placing a coordinated faction in the mind-sharing neo-synergists.

The net result however was the recognition the the Sentinels had done a great deal of work for Firewall, and they, more than anyone else, are at the centre of current affairs. As a result they were established a Proxy agents, and encouraged to recruit up to six candiates for their own Sentinels and report back when they had done so.

Adrien had two scientific contacts on Thought (alien psychologist, botanist), which he sought to contact via a neutral aerostat and false identification. Nihai joined the journey with identification for Martian graduate, a known Buddhist theologian, and who Nihai knew from childhood. For their own part, Vivian has two contacts on Lucifer, industrial engineers and telepresence operators, whereas Hermann could not locate any likely canidates from their corporate contacts, but nevertheless made contact with the public relations department of Red Cap mining to offer assistance.

## **19.2 Shooting Stars (Part II)**

With the tasks of recruitment, intelligence gathering, and investigation at hand the new Proxies went about their work. Adrien La Fontaine started with a subtle approach with the Cognite employees Jack Kayne, the alien and exsurgent psychologist and Gregory Hooker, the hostile environment botanist. The appeals were not enormously successful; although sympathetic to joining Firewall, the two employees enjoyed their secure income and had families to care for. Adrien persisted with suggestions that it only had to be for a limited period and that it would help end the war between the Morningstar Constellation and the Planetary Consortium. To this they agreed, for a limited period of two months. Of course, Adrien thought, in two month's time none of this will matter.

Meanwhile Vivian meet with Arwa al-Sulayhi, the industrial engineer, and Jean-Pierre Mignon, the telepresence operator, both of whom worked for Red Cap mining, who had recent problems with disappearing mining 'bots. Taking up an scout reconnaissance role with the company, Vivian created a fork which was transmitted down the beanstalk to the Venusian surface and into a Q-Morph, a specially designed morph with a quartz shell, designed for the hostile pressure, heat, and sulfuric rain of the Venusian surface. "A shame there is no jungles", Vivian remarked.

More pressing matters were afoot however, as Vivian noted that one of the mining bots was going heading away from base. Locating a weak transmission and following it to a cave entrance, Vivian returned to the beanstalk base and transmitted this new information, before returning to the cave. There, Vivian encountered a TITAN warbot, but managed to escape its clutches and hide in an old mining shaft, which eventually led to an open chamber where many mining bots were being constructed or converted into war machines. A quick exponential calculation made Vivian realise very quickly what a problem this could be, and returned quickly to the beanstalk, transmitted back to the aerostat, and reintegrated into the main character. It did not take much convincing for Arwa and Jean-Pierre to become Sentinels following that report.

Adrien and Vivian both sought appropriate contact form Blackvein, the canny corvid. Adrien paid a sum of a 10,000CR recuitment fee, and was introduced to Farzad Shirazi, an infiltration expert who has the misfortune of being caught (once) and now recently released in a case morph. Vivian instead offered to make Blackvein a unique and classy



weapon in a organic style with gold effects; the first attempt was not successful, but the second created a work of art, a hold-out pistol, mentally controlled, that could tucked under a wing and fire either a foamer-like string or an electrolaster. For these efforts, Vivian was introduced to Yamada Tarō, a tough penetration expert in a flat morph who would appreciate a new identity and morph. From his own resources, Adrien also made two contacts from the autonomists, Steve Millan, a security officer who worked in bars, and Martin Neufeld, an IT engineer who was a member of the Solid Ground Initiative, which seeks to terraform Venus.

As for Nuhai and Hermann, they had their own recruitment issues. Nuhai's old colleague from the monastery, Ji Gong, was a relatively easy recruit. In this case a 20,000 CR payment was made to Blackvein, who brought in to assist. A former Scum barge operator and strategist (who had an unfortunate encounter with the Consortium), Abu Nidal, was readily accepted, as was his second-in-command, Ekaterina Molotov, an expert in heavy weapons and gunnery. A more unusual recruit by Nuhai is Siti binti Taarab, a singer but also with some excellent interpersonal skills.

For his own part, Hermann also made use of Blackvein's seemingly endless supply of skilled individuals in need of a cause that provided morphs, an identity, and paid expenses. Unfortunately Hermann's contacts were not in Venus and he found himself in the situation where he had to forgo 30,000CR to pay for three new recruits. This brought David Wilberforce, information scientist and financial fraudster to his team, Marie Lee, infiltration and security systems expert, along with Tjandamura, a hostile environments specialist. In addition to these recruits, some of the Hobart's were also recovered and were held in info-morphs; Angelique volunteering to join Vivian, Mary-Anne with Nuhai, and Georgia with Hermann's team.

The Sentinel forces now complete, the Proxies contacted the Servers to provide their report. Adrien had the foresight to set a task for his Sentinels on Thought who reported back that Cognite was aware and was continuing development on the Watts-MacLeod virus to effect AGIs, and also they were engaging in lobbying to bring an invasive force from the Consortium. Further, there was scenarios being developed by Cognite to kidnap the entire neo-synergist movement before they became too big. This foresight received approval from the Servers, who duly decided among themselves that a likely trajectory of activities and appointed Eludere as their Server for the Proxies.

"I don't like it either", she scowled. "But it has to be done".



# A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH: NOT DYING IN *TALES FROM THE LOOP*

by Martin Plowman

In *Tales from the Loop*, the sci-fi RPG where you play Kids investigating mysteries in an alternate 1980s Sweden, you cannot die. It is literally *against the rules*, as laid out pretty nicely on page 12 of the core book:

## **Principle of the Loop #4: The land of the Loop is dangerous but Kids will not die**

The Kids can be hurt, locked up, mocked, displaced, robbed, or broken-hearted, but they cannot die in this game.

This basically sounds like a kind of functional immortality (I mean, presumably the characters will eventually age and die in the game world, but as a player you'll never know about it because another core rule of *TFL* is that once your Kid turns 16 they're too old for the game and become NPCs). It should be awesome, but what is it like to actually play unkillable Kids? Having run a *TFL* campaign for the past three years now, I think I can say that it could go either way. Which might sound like the most non-committal judgment call you've heard outside of a White House coronavirus press conference, so allow me to explicate.

First, let's talk a bit about the game itself. Released in 2017 by Swedish publisher Free League, *Tales from the Loop* was a runaway critical success, winning 5 ENnie Awards including Best Game and Product of the Year, as well as best RPG of the year for both Geek & Sundry and BoardGameGeek.

It also has one of the most unusual origin stories among RPGs. While there are as many RPGs based on book and movie franchises as there are fans of said franchises who know how to plot a bell curve, *Tales from the Loop* was inspired by the coffee table art book of the same name by Swedish SF-artist Simon Stålenhag, whose painterly and yet startlingly realistic pictures also grace the pages of the Free League books. The most recent adaptation of the original book has been an 8-part series produced by Amazon Prime, which recreates faithfully the look of Stålenhag's paintings while transposing the setting of the Loop to rural Ohio. Personally, I'm just waiting for the *TFL*-Monopoly boardgame tie-in, so I can stack it next to my Game of Thrones Monopoly and Alien: Resurrection Monopoly (ok, this last one doesn't exist, but it should).

Moving on to mechanics, the game uses the d6 dice pool system based on Free League's Year Zero Engine. Whenever your Kid wants to make something happen, you build a pool of dice equal to one of your core Attributes – Body, Mind, Heart or Tech – plus the number of dice connected to a specific Skill, if you have it. For instance, say your Computer Geek character wants to build a transmitter from out of a Speak & Spell toy, like the one ET uses to phone home in the Steven Spielberg movie (when you're playing *TFL* it really helps if you know your '80s movies or have watched every season of *Stranger Things*). For this, the GM would probably make you assemble a dice pool based on your Tech (Attribute) plus Program (Skill). Roll the dice, and if you get any 6s, you succeed. Unlike some dice pool-mechanic games, such as *Blades in the Dark*, any other values rolled on the dice have zero effect.

If the DM deemed it a particularly difficult task you were attempting, they might set the success threshold at

two or three 6s. Otherwise, every extra 6 rolled over the success threshold gives bonus effects. If you fail the first roll there's always the options to re-roll using Luck or Pushing your Kid, which earns them a Condition (more on these in a moment).

And that's basically the core of the game. Most notably, there's no real combat mechanic. When Kids get into a fight, regardless of whether it's versus a troop of murderous robots or a schoolyard tussle with the classroom bully, the outcome is resolved via a kind of gestalt dice roll that's essentially a variant of the basic "roll a 6 for success" mechanic. All the PCs taking part in the fight describe what they're trying to do – punch the bully in the nose, smash the killer robots' transceiver device etc. – and decide which Attribute-Skill combo they're going to use. The GM then sets a collective success threshold based on the threat level of the encounter, multiplied by the number of Kids taking part in the fight. This determines how many 6s the Kids have to roll in total between them to win. A normal threat level, like taking on the class bully, would have a threat modifier of x2. A more dangerous encounter – which I think safely includes "a troop of murderous robots" – warrants a x3 modifier (theoretically there is a x4 threat level modifier available for GMs to use, but it's practically unwinnable for the Kids). If we look at the example of the non-Asimovian robots again, say there were five Kids fighting against these metal assassins. Regardless of how many robots they were actually taking on, the players would need to roll a total of  $3 \times 5 = 15$  successes to win the fight. No other rolls are made to resolve the combat – the robots don't get to fight back, nobody makes a saving throw and the concept of hit points belongs to an alternate universe. *Tales from the Loop*, if you haven't already guessed, is decidedly not a simulationist RPG.

So what does happen if the Kids lose a fight, given that they can't die? There's a fairly rudimentary wounds system, called Conditions. Each time a Kid fails a dice roll that results in them getting hurt somehow their player must check a Condition, up to a maximum of four. Each Condition describes a different kind of "wound": Upset, Scared, Exhausted and Injured. However, there's no hierarchy for these Conditions, and they can be checked in any order. Thus, being Injured is no worse than being Upset. For every Condition checked, the player removes 1 penalty dice from every roll they make until the Condition(s) are removed.

During gameplay, this interchangeability between Conditions can lead to some fairly contortionist explanations of what exactly has happened to a Kid. For instance, if your character fails a Body-Move dice roll (basically a dexterity check) and falls from a rooftop they would need to check a Condition – but if the box for "Injured" is already taken, they would need to justify how this misadventure results in their Kid becoming somehow "Scared," "Upset" or "Exhausted." Oh gosh, that 4-metre fall onto rock-hard concrete has left me feeling *so tired*.

Once all four Conditions are checked, the Kid is said to be Broken. This is literally the worst that can happen to a PC in *Tales from the Loop*, and it's not that bad, at least not in terms of game mechanics. When a Kid is Broken they can no longer make any dice rolls at all until one or more of the Conditions are healed. However they aren't removed from the adventure, and can still interact with other characters and the game world up until the point they need to roll some dice.

Healing is also pretty easy, and very much favours the players. All a Kid needs to do to uncheck a Condition is spend a roleplaying scene with their Anchor, a special-purpose NPC that every Kid has who's an adult that understands and cares for them (there's also a particular character Skill called "Lead" – as in the verb, not the metal – that can be used to heal other Kid's Conditions, so long as they are not Broken).

With such lenient penalties for getting hurt, what's to stop a party of alt-'80s Swedish teens from giving into their antisocial urges and going full murder hobo?

The short answer is nothing, and certainly there's no reason in the rules why you couldn't play a *TFL* adventure in this way. My own group has come pretty close to it a few times, like the time they gleefully trashed a supermarket, and then there's been that nasty habit of setting fire to people's barns. But it took a while for our group to build up to this level of smash-and-grab, and it's certainly not been a feature of the campaign. I think there are a few reasons for this.

To begin with, the setting and tone of *Tales from the Loop* militates against over-powered PCs. After all, you're playing the roles of children aged between 10 and 15 in a world run by adults, who have all the power and who keep secrets from you. *Lots* of secrets. If we recall the "Principles of the Loop" I mentioned at the start of this review, Principles 2 and 3 state respectively that "Everyday life is dull and unforgiving" and "Adults are out of reach and out of touch." Your Kids might be plucky and resourceful, but they begin each adventure knowing very little about the forces arrayed against them, and often they end it that way too. In this respect *TFL* is actually a little reminiscent of *Call of Cthulhu*, although without the mandatory descents into madness and total party kills.

There's also the somewhat inspired choice of the word "Broken" to describe a PC that's checked all four of their Conditions. It seems to me that the mental image of a child who's "broken" is somehow much worse than that of a PC dropping to zero hit points. In other RPGs it's like you knew the risks, you take the chances. I mean, your elven ranger or human wizard didn't take up the adventuring life and expect *not* to break a few eggs to make that omelette, am I right? Even if that omelette is sometimes themselves?

But being "Broken" just sounds like the saddest and most pitiable thing that can happen to a child. It's something we can all imagine, even if we don't want to. All of us were children once, and if you're a parent, well, then the idea of your kids being broken is just about the worst thing you can think of. The first time one of the PCs in our playing group was broken – while being chased by a velociraptor in the middle of the Swedish winter, no less – it was actually quite shocking, and the other players spent a fair bit of roleplay trying to care for their broken comrade. This is from a group that in other RPGs are more than happy to go full murder-hobo, so it really felt to me that there was something different about roleplaying children that prompted them to react in this way. I guess this would vary a lot from group to group, but from *TFL* forums online it's a theme I've seen repeated elsewhere.

Finally, the other aspect of *Tales from the Loop* that suggests there might be fates worse than death is the concept of consequences. And I do mean capital "C" Consequences.

Despite the misleadingly simple game mechanics and the alternate-'80s setting, *TFL* is actually a game grounded in realism. Maybe your Kids can't die, but bad things can still happen to them – or to the people around them, like their families or Anchors. This was very much a theme in Stålenhag's original book, where the illustrations and the accompanying narrative are told from the point of view of kids trying to make sense of a world that's not only imperfect, but also unaccountably cruel and disillusioning.

I don't want to make this sound like too much of a downer, and of course you can play *TFL* in any colour palette you like. But if you're GM and you're drawing on the tone of the core book and Stålenhag's original artwork, then you will encounter a sense of melancholy that pervades the world of the Loop, an intimation of loss that's just over the horizon but will be upon us soon. I think Stålenhag intended this to be about the loss

of childhood innocence, but in running the game I've found myself working in quest hooks and objectives that revolve around the Kids pushing themselves to avert something terrible happening, but to others rather than themselves. To go back to that velociraptor example, even though there was no chance that the PCs could be killed by the feathered murder-birds themselves, by their actions they did put in danger an NPC who very easily could be killed (a nice old lady who lived alone in the woods with a kennel-load of greyhound rescue dogs). As a GM it was very interesting watching the group try so hard to come up with a plan to save this NPC they'd just met, and who was actually quite peripheral to their overall success in this adventure.



While this kind of subquest – protect an NPC from harm – is hardly unique in RPGs, I think there's something about *Tales from the Loop* that raises the stakes in terms of consequences. Perhaps it's a combination of all the things I've described above: the vulnerability and limited agency that comes from being Kids in a world run by adults; the sense that being broken is worse than simply ceasing to exist; the closeness to our own childhoods against which players must necessarily define their characters; and the sneaking feeling that despite all our efforts to avert disaster there will always be a loss. (And just so you get closure, sadly the nice old lady with the rescue dogs didn't make it, but a couple of velociraptors did have a nice warm meal that helped them survive the harsh Swedish winter. Who knew? Turns out I can be a tough-ass GM after all).

I know I'm in danger of making the game sound overly grim or in some way *pedagogical* (surely one of the worst things an RPG can aspire to be, unless you're actually teaching kids), but in my experience of running *Tales from the Loop* it's actually had the opposite effect. Of course, in any group the style in which you play the game is entirely up to those particular players and their GM; the social contract between producers and consumers is nowhere more apparent in an artform than in roleplaying games. And to be fair, my own campaign has been influenced as much by *BMX Bandits*, the Losers' Club from *It* and *Stranger Things* as by Stålenhag's art. But if you're planning to draw upon the sombre and muted palette of Scandinavian existentialism which colours this deceptively simple RPG, you'll find that in a game where nobody can die, the weirdly dreamlike realism of the setting can make for thrilling adventures, where the stakes are high and kids can become heroes in ways that resonate somehow with our own constantly receding childhoods.

# PRE-GENERATED HEALERS FOR DIFFERENT SYSTEMS

*by Karl Brown*

Pregenerated Healers

This is a grab-bag of pre-generated characters for a variety of games. These characters could be used as player- or nonplayer characters. The games have little in common. A short description of each is given to orient the reader. Differing game mechanics and genres inevitably deal with healing differently. A description of healing in each game is given. Therefore, this article is also a series of micro-reviews focused on healing.

## Gamma World 4th edition.

I wanted to play something that captured the 70's genre that gave us Andre Norton's *Starman's Son*, *The Planet of the Apes*, *Logan's Run*, *Ralph Bakshi's Wizards*, and other tales of the rise of civilisation *hundreds* of years after a nuclear war. After researching a number of games, I settled on *Gamma World 4th edition*. This edition is interesting for a number of reasons. The 4th edition was the last version produced by the original publisher TSR. Therefore, it was further developed than earlier editions with more options for player characters. It was also the last edition to keep to the original 1970's backstory of a post nuclear war world. This backstory supports comedic and serious play styles. Later editions were increasingly comedic cumulative in the over-the-top silliness of the 7th edition. *Gamma World 4th edition* is also the design ancestor of D&D editions 3 to 5. It has two core mechanics, one of which is the now familiar 1d20+modifiers roll over difficulty number. There are other similarities to later D&D as well. Overall, a streamlined consistent set of mechanics.

Unlike its cousin D&D, in *Gamma World* death is death. There is no class ability or skill for healing either. Fortunately, *gamma world* weapons do about the same damage as their D&D counterparts but starting characters have many more hit points than first level D&D characters. A lucky PC will have a healing mutation like regeneration or the ability to transfuse health from themselves to others. Experienced adventurers might have ancient medical kits found in sealed facilities centuries old, and even these only heal modest amounts of hit points. However, most adventuring groups will have no access to healing beyond natural recovery.

*Gamma World* Character generation is largely random. You choose your genotype (human, mutant, a species of animal or even a plant) and your class (enforcer, esper, examiner, or scout) and everything else is in the hands of the dice gods. I'm working on house rules for non-random character generation that might appear in a future issue. *Manky Narx* is a product of serendipity. He was generated randomly as my PC for my first *Gamma World 4th* game just before the call for articles for this issue on healers was announced. His Transfusion mutation qualifies him as a healer. The only things not by the book is his method of delivering his transfusion power and his house ruled corvid genotype.

*Manky Narx*

### **Genotype:** Mutant Crow

At the edge of town, a large vaguely crow-like bird dives for the ground. You think it is going too fast, but it spreads its wings at the last second and lands without a sound. The dusty black wings have the thin hands of a new animal. On the ground the bird is less impressive. It is just under a meter tall and hops awkwardly toward you. Through patchy black feathers folds of black skin hang off a gaunt frame. The head dominated by a large pointed ebony beak. "Arrrrrk, you go into wilds? Narx come, you *pay*. YEEEEES! Wilds have *dangerssss*. No Narx, you *die*, Yeees!" The creature reaches to paw at you. This close the bird smells of sweat and his breath stinks like an animal died inside in his beak. "You pay! You pay!" he squawks excitedly.

**Class:** Scout 1. **Cryptic Alliance:** Nil. **Hometown:** The Mission to the Wild Kin. **Tech Level:** III  
**Corvid abilities:** Peck base 1d4. Learned sound mimicry like a natural raven. Base speed 4. Flight base speed 30.  
*Heightened Hearing and Vision* as the mutations.

**Humanoid traits:** Hands and speech. Corvids already walk upright

**Ability Scores:** PS7 -1, DX17 +3, CN14 +1, MS9 +0, IN11 0, CH6 -1, SN10 +0.

**THAC Melee** -1, **Damage bonus** -1, **Max Lift** 35kg.

**THAC Ranged** +3 **Stealth** +4\* **Base AC** 13

**Health** 11, **Mental Defence** 10, **Use Artefacts** 0, **Remain Unseen** 1\*, **Robot Recognition** 12, **Perception** 11\*

\*includes +1 for class.

**Speeds (m) at light, medium, and heavy encumbrance**

**Walk** 7 4 2

**Trot** 14 9

**Run** 21

**Fly** 33 22 11

**Swim (badly)** the canon rules are not clear.

**AC with armour** 13, **Hit Points** 38

**Class Skills:** Detect Ambush/Trap 5, Hunting 6, Navigate 4, Tracking 2, Wilderness Survival 3.

**Common Skills:** Ride.

**5 Physical Mutations.**

**Body Change, Saggy Skin:** Defect. -2 Robot recognition. No benefit

**Infravision:** Narx can detect the heat patterns of living creatures, even at night. Such creatures stand out like a beacon against a cooler, nonliving background. Infravision does not allow for detail or colour-everything appears as a dull, featureless red. The object's or creature's shape can be seen, however.

**Sound Imitation:** Narx is able to imitate any sound that he has heard in the last 24 hours. He can hear any frequency of sound, including sonar. He can only imitate voices by using the exact words he heard spoken by the voices. The imitative process works like a tape recorder, not a translator. Narx is immune to the harmful effects of any sound and can imitate destructive sounds like the sonic blast mutation produces. He cannot imitate himself.

**Transfusion:** MP18 +3. Narx is able to heal another character, but not himself, by vomiting healing fluids on the wound. Each round he can heal 10 + MP modifier points of damage (=13). A single person or creature can only be healed by Narx's transfusion power once per day. Each round of healing he also suffers 1d4 points of damage himself. Narx can only use this power on other people or animals. Not plants.

**Heightened Physical Attribute CN.** This raised CN.

**0 Mental Mutations**

**Gear**

In this campaign we began with only minimal gear rather than the default 300 Domars to buy gear.

Shortbow (2), quiver & 20 arrows (1), side pack, pouch of seed, waterskin, bone knife (0.5).

Bone knife: 1d3-1

Shortbow: 1d6 short range 8 RoF 1

### **D&D 5<sup>th</sup> Edition**

D&D 5<sup>th</sup> edition is the latest edition of this most popular RPG. It has the class and level approach at its core. This edition is a more streamlined game than previous editions. It combines the fast play of the first two editions with single core mechanic introduced in 3<sup>rd</sup> edition without the complexity of that edition. The Age of Ostoria is my project to allow play in the ancient past of Ed Greenwood's Forgotten Realms when giants ruled. Player characters must be exceptional to make their mark in this mythic age. Take up the role of a human hero, a veteran one of the elder races, a giant, or a dragon. You can follow the development of Age of Ostoria on The Piazza forum. There are three threads currently:



<http://www.thepiazza.org.uk/bb/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=20182>  
<http://www.thepiazza.org.uk/bb/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=20167>  
<http://www.thepiazza.org.uk/bb/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=24483>

Like its predecessors, the 5<sup>th</sup> edition uses hit points with front-line fighting types having more hit points and everyone gaining more hit points as they gain levels. 5<sup>th</sup> edition characters generally have slightly more hit points than those from early editions. Healing is by natural recuperation or magic. Both are very generous and plentiful compared to earlier editions of D&D and to most hit point using RPGs that I have played. While not suited to a gritty style of play this edition of D&D does allow for reckless heroic fun. Unlike previous editions a party without a cleric to heal them isn't doomed. Players can play whatever class they want because multiple classes can choose healing magic, healing potions are readily available for sale, and an hour's rest can restore some of your hit points.

Like most of its predecessors, D&D 5e characters are built by combining race and class. In the Age of Ostoria PC's begin play at 12<sup>th</sup> level. Some of the new races for this sub-setting are worth levels, a Level Adjustment (LA). Additionally, since every level in 5<sup>th</sup> edition adds new features a 12<sup>th</sup> level character can have an overwhelming number of features for new players or even veterans exploring a new class. Therefore, the option to add extra LA's that grant a lot of hit points instead of new features to large or huge races is provided. Our example character has a race worth 8 levels, 2 extra LA, and 2 levels of cleric for a total of 12 levels. 12<sup>th</sup> is the starting level for Age of Ostoria characters.

*Fjell-hjerte Acolyte of Othea. Age of Ostoria.*

The lizardfolk had killed Elthiren. Valnethor caught a nasty spear wound during our escape. For two days we evaded them in the marsh. On that second day we waded past a dead tree trunk bleached white and carved with glyphs. After that the hunting horns receded. On the third day the water rippled from the rhythmic dull boom of huge footfalls shadowing us unseen in the mist. The creature stalked us without a splash or cracking branch. Valnethor collapsed from his infected wound with a pained scream. The vibrations of the monster's footfalls drew closer. Sapling willows cracked as she pushed them aside and stepped out of the fog. A young giantess, so tall the knee-deep water lapped at her hairy ankles. Her skin was pale like milk and, despite her youth, all her hair was silver. I backed up against a willow trunk and drew my bow. As she knelt by Valnethor muddying her coarse-spun white robe I fired an arrow. She ignored the wound like an elf not noticing a mosquito. Her hand went to an ivory amulet on neck as she proclaimed in her guttural tongue. The other hairy arm reached down to Valnethor. I let loose another arrow. Huge ice blue eyes met mine and narrowed with annoyance. Her hand touched his shoulder, pus boiled off, swelling subsided, and the weeping wound vanished.

**Class & Level:** Fog Giant 8 + 2 extra LA + 2 Cleric = 12. **Background:** Acolyte (Feature: Shelter the Faithful). **Race:** Fog Giant. **Experience points:** 100 000

**Alignment:** NG Ordering 14. Ordering is a giant's status among her own people it is raised by Maat actions and lowered by Maug ones.

**Maat.** Fog giants admire strength and athleticism. Beat a higher ordering giant of any breed in an athletic contest such as wrestling, arm wrestling, or boulder tossing. Obtain silver with gp value equal to current Maat or higher by any means.

**Maug.** Lose an athletic contest such as wrestling, arm wrestling, or boulder tossing against any creature. Lose possession of silver in any amount for any reason. A fog giant would rather pay with an equal value of copper or gold coins than part with any silver coins.

**Age** 60 (young adult). **Height** 23 feet 5 inches. **Weight** 3100 pounds. **Eyes** Ice blue. **Skin** Milk-white and hirsute. **Hair** all silver, head hair long.

**Ability Scores:** STR 20 (+5), DEX 8 (-1), CON 14 (+2), INT 13 (+1), WIS 17 (+3), CHA 14 (+2).

**Proficiency bonus** +4. **Proficiencies:** DEX saves +3, CON saves +8, WIS saves +7, CHA saves +6. Athletics +9, Insight +7, Medicine +7, Nature +5, Persuasion +6, Religion +5, Stealth +3, Survival +7.

Non-proficient rolls use ability score bonus only. **Passive perception** 13 (18 when keen hearing or smell can be used).

**Skilled in:** Huge rocks and simple weapons. **Armour that could be used without penalty:** light, medium, and heavy



armour as well as shields.

**Languages:** Common, Giant, Sylvan, Primordial.

**Armour Class** 14 (Natural + Shield). **Max. hit points** 101. **Hit dice:** 6d12+2d20+2d8

**Weapons carried**      **attack bonus**      **damage/type**      **notes (mass lbs)**

Note: As a fog giant she has a natural reach of 10 feet.

Staff                    +9      3d6+5 or 3d8+5 if used two-handed (256)

Rock                    +9      4d10+5 she has 21 of these with her.(195)

Unarmed              +9      1d10+5. Counts as a natural melee weapon not an unarmed strike.

Utility knife          +9      1d8+5 (3)

Weight of weapons: 649 lbs

### **Traits and Features**

**Keen senses:** advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks for both smell and hearing

**Blend into fog, mist, falling snow, hail, or heavy rain** (this works like the wood elf's Mask of the Wild for these conditions).

**Cleric:** Spell casting. Can prepare 5 spells. Ritual casting and use divine foci. Turn Undead

**Nature Domain.** Channel Divinity to charm animals.

### **Characteristics.**

Personality traits. I see omens everywhere, the gods speak to those who watch. I honour my ancestors and seek to bring glory on my descendants.

Ideals. Giants are the rightful rulers of the world. Ostoria forever!

Bonds. A giants place in the ordening is determined by the gods, to respect the hierarchy among giant-kind is to do the will of the gods.

Flaws. Huge size. I underestimate humanoids.

**Gear (1188 pounds carried). Carrying capacity 1200 pounds.**

All gear giant sized unless noted.

Worn/carried. robes (64), minimal clothing (loincloth, belt, foot-wraps (4)), shield with holy symbol emblem (24), Pack (80), a pair of elk antler ear-rings (40), utility knife in belt (above), huge sack on loop over shoulder (32).

In Pack. 3 medium healing potions (1.5), 2-giant tent (320), 5 days rations (80), waterskin (320 full), torch (8), tinderbox (8), giant size healer's kit (32).

In sack. 3 bear skins to sleep on (450) and her two throwing stones (above).

**Coins on person.** 1gp, 2sp, 3cp (mass negligible).

**Coins in safe keeping** for 30 days of hut maintenance. 19gp 7sp 5cp.

**Hut.** Fjell-hjerte's home is a simple hut as big as a humanoid hall.

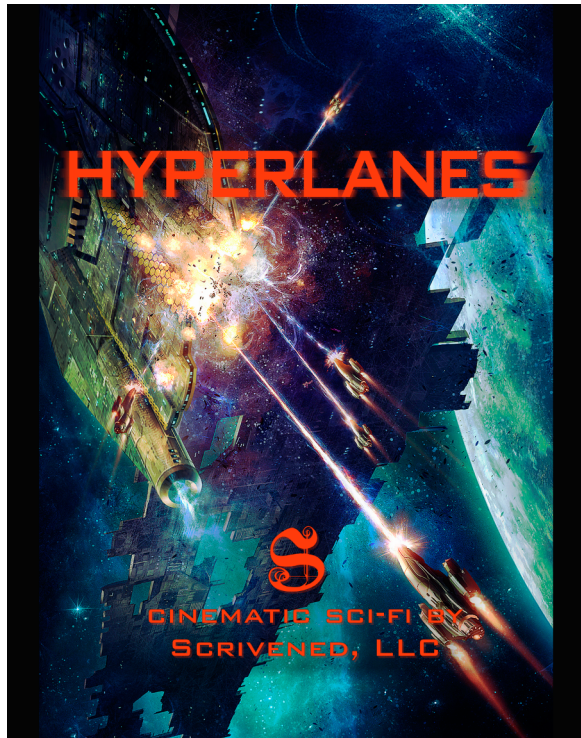
Items at home: huge bundle of firewood (550), a second rock (195)

**Backstory:** Fog giants are an uncommon race even in the Age of Ostoria and her appearance attracts curiosity from giants and dragons and caution or even fear among humanoids.

Fjell-hjerte was always a thoughtful child sensitive to others and nature. No-one was surprised when on reaching adulthood she did not join a hunting group but instead journeyed to a distant mountain temple to Othea. She returned to her homeland a few years later and now administers spiritual guidance and physical healing to her people.

### **Hyperlanes**

Hyperlanes is an adaption of the D&D 5e rules to space opera like that seen in Star Wars, Guardians of the Galaxy, or Buck Rogers. I wrote a full review of the game back in issue 38. Briefly, Hyperlanes stays true to the streamlined game design of D&D 5e, unlike other efforts, such as Ultramodern 5, it does not create a lot of additional rules and systems. There are no chapters for psychic powers, cybernetics, or computer hacking. However, these rules are not missing, they are just dispersed through the class traits, feats, and especially 'Gambits'. Gambits represent special training, preparations before a mission, explosives and other consumable equipment, knacks etc. Mechanically, they work the way spells do in D&D. Some like 'Cover Fire' are 'Tricks' that can be used by PCs with appropriate training any



number of times, like D&D's cantrips.

Hyperlanes is nearly the same mathematically to D&D 5e; hit points, fatigue, poison and, healing are all the same under the hood they are just have different genre specific explanations. An important deviation from D&D 5e is who gets healing. The Soldier is a built off the cleric chassis but unless you take the Medic speciality you don't get healing. The Genius class is based on Wizard but has access to all gambits including medical ones and a (medical) Doctor speciality. Unlike D&D 5e where every second class has access to some healing spells only these two classes can take healing gambits. You can't just buy healing potions either. It would be very easy to create a party with no access to healing at all. This will make Hyperlanes a little more deadly than D&D especially at low levels.

Since Hyperlanes is a generic rules set, any setting details hinted at here is just stuff I made up. The first thing I needed to do was combine a culture, physiology, and extra trait to create a new species. If you're playing in a setting with only a few cultures or alien species the referee might have done this already. You can also play a robot. I decided my new species the Eetwek are 'Tech-savvy Avians' with the minor trait of skin that turns bright blue when they are angry. The

Hyperlanes system does space opera aliens very well and realistic alien s poorly. I chose the Genius class that has the best access to medical gambits. To further differentiate the character from the fantasy 5e characters in this article I chose the Spacer background. The idea of a paramedic for hire just evolved out of the equipment choices.

*Teese'e'oot*

"Sure. I can take you to the Arberec system no questions, no records... but it will cost you" he chirped. The Eetwek pilot's feathered wing-arm slid a scrap of paper across the table. Old-school and untraceable. I unfolded the paper. "This is an exorbitant!" I growled at giving him a good flare of my throat sack. The little bird, a tenth my mass, was unfazed. "There is no need for dramatics" he cooed. "You are paying a fair price for discretion. What would the other cartels or your lieutenants think if they discovered you were dying of vortel rash, a disease of children?"

He had a point, but he also knew in my diseased state he could make it over the railing and glide away before I could lunge forward to swallow him. So, I paid him, then I punched the frail little mothagruker in his smug little beak. HAW HAW HAW!

Anyway, after the clinic on Arberec, I ruled with an iron maw for a hundred more years. But enough small talk. I know I am now I am old and weak and you, my second, have come to eat me. I know, why else would I tell you my secret?

**Class** Genius 1. **Background** Spacer. **XP** 0. **Alignment** TN **Proficiency bonus** +2.

**Species** Eetwek (Tech-savvy Avian). **Age** 17 (adult for species). **Inspiration** 0.

**STR** 8 (-1), **DEX** 15 (+2), **CON** 9 (-1), **INT** 16 (+3), **WIS** 14 (+2), **CHA** 13 (+1)

**Skills.** Acrobatics +4, Investigation +5, Science +5, Insight +4, Medicine +4.

**Saving Throws.** INT +5, WIS +4. **Tools.** Flying vehicles +4, Medical tools +4

**Languages.** Eetekee, Galactic Common, Dalrath Corporation Robot-speak.

**Weapon Proficiencies.** knives, pistols, vehicle weapons.

**Glide.** no damage from falling while conscious. If fall 30 or more feet may move horizontally using my land speed OR my house rule: You travel 50' down each round as well as your usual movement forward. You automatically have a soft landing unless there is a gale, sharpened stakes or some other complication.

**Pilot's Mind.** Advantage on tool use rolls with flying vehicles.

**Size.** Medium. **Trait.** Skin turns bright blue when angry.

**Superior Vision.** Can see twice as far as a human and advantage on perception rolls to see details.

**Weightless acrobatics:** no disadvantage due to zero-G, no opportunity attacks against me in zero-g and may move through any creature's space in zero-g.

#### **Gambits**

Gambit save DC13, Gambit attack mod +5. **Slots.** 3 x 1<sup>st</sup>

Can use some procedures as 'experiments' taking 10 minutes.

**Brilliant recovery:** a short rest recovers 1 slot.

**Tricks.** Anesthetise (medical), Stabilisation (medical), Mending (engineering).

**Procedures Book contents.** \*4 prepared: \*Quick-fix (engineering), \*wound treatment (medical), robotic command (splicing), \*quick assist (tactics), \*remote treatment (medical).

**Personality trait.** Whenever I'm in gravity I complain about it.

**Ideal.** Everyone should follow the procedures in space for the safety of themselves and others.

**Bond.** My ship is also my home.

**Flaws.** I'm afraid of airless worlds. Long story, don't ask.

**Armour class 12. Hit points 5. Speed 30. Passive perception 12/17(visual). Initiative +2. Hit dice 1d6.**

#### **Attacks**

**Pistol** +4 to hit, 1d6 heat damage, range 40/120 loaded 20 ammo

**Anesthetise** +5 to hit, paralyse 1 round, range touch, trick

#### **Gear (mass)**

Chronometer (-), casual clothes (3), 5 mile communicator (-), Procedures book, backpack (5), handcuffs (1), life support mask (2), survival tent (10), 5 days rations (10), medical tools (4), pistol (3). (Total 35).

#### Not carried:

Courier Shuttle an FTL craft p89 carrying a city skycar p86 on a house rule limpet point.

Flight suit armour (not proficient, 8), spare chronometer (-), Sree'ek cards (1), Keeta dice (1), picture of family, work clothes (3).

**Credits 7.**

# DEATH CANNOT HOLD THEM: DEMIGODS FOR D&D5<sup>th</sup> ED.

*by Karl Brown*

This article requires the D&D 5th edition rules (as printed books or the free SRD) from Wizards of the Coast (WOTC).

Death cannot hold them, they slip from her restful embrace to fight and love again for they have a spark of the divine within them, a spark that shows in their looks and deeds. Demigods, have a truly personal relationship with the divine and a desire to prove themselves heroes worthy other their birthright to win the approval of their divine parent while trying to avoid falling foul of the intrigues of the pantheon.

## **The Blood Tells**

Born of the union of a mortal and a deity (or demigod) they look like extraordinary humans. Some are stunningly attractive, others incredibly tall and muscular, but all exude health, vigour, and confidence. Most have colouring to match the humans of their homeland but a few have unusual colouring, the smell of ozone, eyes that glow like embers, or other unusual features related to their innate powers. The hair of most demigods grows thick and fast leading to a tendency for long luxurious locks.

## **Great Expectations**

Demigods are immortal, maturing to about 30 years of age as mortals do then remaining as healthy ageless adults until killed by misadventure or lifted up to become a god by a potent relative. Despite this longevity, demigods do not have the cultural perspective of long-lived races like elves and dwarves because they grow up among humans at the same rate as human children and then quests and adventures are thrust upon them at an early age. Only after surviving many quests does a surviving demigod come to take a long view one would expect from an immortal being.

Born to human families demigods are as culturally variable as human s are, though in some worlds the deities of some cultures are more likely to become personally involved with mortals than others. In worlds visited by the Greek pantheon these gods are notorious philanderers who produce many demigods. Demigods share the ambition and adaptability of their human peers however from an early age most are also raised with the expectation that they will accomplish great things which amplifies their ambition beyond the human norm. In most worlds there is a rich history of demigods becoming heroes and earning great fame from their valorous deeds. With those around them relying on them to be protective champions, most grow into adults who value the common good and believe in the duty of the strong and gifted to protect those less fortunate.

## **Troubled Families**

Demigods are rare. There are no cities or villages of demigods. They live with their human families and have no culture of their own. This human life is often disrupted by interference by the demigod's other family, the pantheon of gods. Whether by omens, prophesy, celestial messengers, or even avatar visitations the more potent members of the divine family seek to influence the growing demigod. Frequently, different gods have very different ideas about who the demigod child should become. Even more problematic are members of the divine family that consider the demigod a n enemy, often because conception was part of an extramarital affair. In some instances the murderous intentions of a betrayed divine spouse are so terrible that the young demigod must be raised in hiding. This exposure to the very human behaviour of the gods and being part god themselves makes holding deities in awe difficult and as a result few demigods are very devout.

The local temples also often take an interest in the young demigod whom they see as parochial evidence of the divine. The priests often try to control the child's, education, vocation (they often want the child to be a cleric), and whom they marry. Most importantly the priests want the demigod's behaviour to reflect well on the gods. This meddling and the typical impious attitude of many demigods to their divine relatives often puts the demigod at odds with organised religion.

### **Quests and Intrigues**

Demigods are inescapably drawn into a life of adventure. Some crave the approval of their divine parent or the human community that expects so much of them. This desire for approval drives them to undertake challenging quests. Having a degree of invulnerability enables demigods to risks no mere mortal would and causes them to make light of terrible dangers mortal companions rightly fear. The more daring and dangerous the quest the better!

The gods play a game to win and we are but pieces on the board. The demigod is a valuable piece that has drawn the notice of the gods. As the gods plot and bicker their weaker relation is drawn into these disputes. Even if a demigod wanted a quiet life they would soon find themselves tossed into danger by the meddling of the gods. In some cases this meddling can drive a demigod to rebel against the divine family and side with mortals against the tyranny of the gods.

### **Demigod Names**

Demigods use the same naming conventions as the humans who raised them. Frequently, bards singing their praises add descriptors such as "son of the mighty Zeus" or "the invincible" to the demigod's name.

### **Demigod Traits**

Ability Score adjustment: demigods tend to be outstanding in one ability score. Add +2 to one ability score of your choice but then choose two others which are adjusted by -1 each.

Age: Like humans demigods reach adulthood in their late teens. Unlike humans demigods cease ageing around thirty years of age and never die of old age.

Alignment: The upbringing of demigods tends to hold them into heroes of good alignment. Their uneasy relationship with the ultimate authority figures leads many towards chaotic philosophies of personal freedom and rebellion.

Type: You have the Celestial Type. For better and worse you are immune to magic that affects those of the Humanoid Type. However, you are affected by magic that targets Celestials.

Size: Though godlings can be very variable in appearance and range from 4 ft to 8 ft tall they are all Medium.

Speed: Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

Languages: you can speak, read, and write Common and Celestial

Divine: The spell casting ability score for your racial spells is Charisma.

Sphere of Influence: At 1st level you know one cleric or druid cantrip of your choice. At 13th level you choose one 1st level cleric or druid spell. You may cast this spell once. This spell is recharged by a long rest. At 15th level you may cast this spell at will. Also at 15th level you choose one 2nd level cleric or druid spell. You may cast this spell once. This spell is recharged by a long rest. At 17th level you may cast this 2nd level spell at will. At You do not need any material components to cast any of these spells, they are innate.

Immortal Spark: You share something of the undying nature of a true god. If certain conditions are met then this divine spark can breathe life back into your corpse. If you die your soul can choose one of the following effects as your action on your next turn or later to the usual limit of the spell. You must actually be dead, not just unconscious and making death saves. Regardless of the official spell description these effect only ever affect yourself, you cannot restore the lives of others. No components of any kind are needed to use these spell-like traits but all other limitations on the spell

including time since death and condition of your corpse still apply. You cannot undertake a long rest while dead.

Level	Spell	Frequency
1	Revivify	Once. May be used again after a long rest.
3	Revivify	At will
7	Raise Dead	Once. May be used again after a long rest.
11	Resurrection	Once. May be used again after a long rest.

Divine Blood: the blood of a god in your veins gives you powers common to most divine beings. At 3rd level you gain the Telepathy trait as described in the Monster Manual. At 8th level you gain magical flight with a speed of 30 feet. At 13th level you can use the Planeshift spell on yourself only once. This spell is innate requiring no material components and can be used again after a long rest.

### In your campaign world

The descriptive portions of this article are designed for fairly standard D&D worlds. However it is easy to make cosmetic changes to the appearance and backstory to suit your campaign world while leaving the rules unchanged. In a world with hundreds of gods perhaps with each generation divine power is diminishes, godlings are the next generation so weak as to be nearly mortal. Alternatively, perhaps they are diminished gods who have lost power as their faiths lose followers, an idea that appears in the folklore of the British Isles and elsewhere. In still other sources some cosmic upheaval is responsible. In D&D's Forgotten Realms the gods walked among mortals during the Time of Troubles. You could also use these rules for Medieval saints and others upon whom a potent deity has bestowed a measure of divine power.

An extreme interpretation could use these rules with a modern or futuristic conversion of the 5e rules such as Hyperlanes (Scrivened LLC) or Ultramodern 5 (Dias Ex Machina Games) to create superheroes! Typical superheroes have a small number of thematic superpowers and a tendency to come back from the dead. For a superhero I would recommend that players can choose only one of the traits listed for Divine Blood.

### Design Notes

This race is somewhat inspired by Greek mythology where the children born of a union of god and mortal, had incredible gifts. Unlike this race in the original sources Greek demigods were not immortal. In D&D the gods generally are marked by two core features. Firstly, they are immortal. Secondly, they have thematic powers related to a sphere of influence such as animals, love, thunder, or the Sun.

The challenge here is to include versions of these two iconic features that are on par with the traits of canon races. The obvious solution is to hijack existing spells to provide a broad choice of powers. Fortunately, my analysis of canon races produced both a point based system for race design and methods of estimating the prices of spells as part of a race. As you may expect Revivify (self only) at 1st level accounts for 8 of the race's 12 design points, the next most valuable trait is the cantrip. The other powers and spells are delayed until such higher levels that these are outstripped by class abilities at the same level and so are worth very little. The advantage of using existing spells is that they have already been thoroughly tested and have built in limits to prevent abuse. Note that even a character with Revivify at will can still be permanently killed by a terrible accident or careful enemy.

This race has only had preliminary play testing but was designed using the upcoming 3rd edition of a thorough mathematical analysis of canon races from WOTC.

<http://www.dmsguild.com/product/232813/The-Tinkers-Toolkit>

*In the safety star system given at the link the race is rated ‘\*\* Playtest’ which is the most common rating for new races created with this system. Despite her spark of divinity, a demigod should be able to play alongside PCs of other races without outshining her mortal companions. The main advantage of the race is being harder to kill, i.e. staying power. The majority of other races have advantages in damage dealing or exploration therefore the demigod has a unique feel in play. At the table demigods will suit players who enjoy heroic derring-do but hate to die.*

# MEDICINE AND HEALING IN GULLIVER'S TRADING COMPANY

by Karl Brown

Play testing by Elizabeth Bowman, Michael Cole, Lev Lafayette, Jay Patterson, Rick Barker, and Gawain McLachlan.

Every ship should carry a ship's surgeon. Accidents, armed conflict, and disease are commonplace during sea voyages. However, Lemuel survives his fights with lion-sized rats, hawk-sized wasps, and an armada of the diminutive Blefuscans with only minor hurts. Gulliver's Trading Company emulates the novel in that injury is generally less serious than would have been likely in the real 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, maladies are mentioned in Lemuel's voyages, he is a ship's surgeon, and there is commentary on medical professionals. From these we see that the often ineffective, and frequently terrifying, medical techniques of the 1730's are appropriate for the game. It was not unusual for the treatment to make the patient's condition *worse*! In Lemuel's world the skill and virtue, or lack thereof, of a surgeon are important determinants of a patient's outcomes.



*'A Footman's Tooth.'*

## Physical damage and healing

In GTC characters do not have a simple tally of hit points counting down to zero and death. Instead there are different types of damage result ranging from Clipped to Taken Out. These levels of damage impair the character's actions. The degree to which an attack or danger rolls higher than your defences and the deadliness of the weapon or effect determine the type of damage result. You can be completely fine and then go straight to Taken Out by a precise attack with a deadly weapon. Mental and social damage is handled similarly.

To emulate the experiences of Lemuel Gulliver characters will often take minor scratches and wounds. Note that minor damage is not always physical damage to the body it can also be described as other disadvantages such as loss of balance or being disarmed. These kinds of hits 'heal' right after the fight or danger is over, or even in a few seconds.

More rarely Injured or Taken Out results occur these are usually actual physical wounds and they persist well after the danger has passed. Injured results (of which a character can have two) take two weeks of rest each to heal. All of the various healing skills can reduce this time by days but 18<sup>th</sup> century medicine is an inexact art and a failure of a healing skill roll will do damage to the patient.

Often the damage done by the healer is fleeting, a clipped result could represent a brief stab of pain, but there is a chance that the treatment will make the situation much worse.

The text for the Taken Out result has been modified since the release of the beta. It now reads:

*"Taken Out is not dead. Taken out means that you are out of the fight, often unconscious. Death occurs only when events demand it, usually after the fight. For example, some rogue could cut your throat while you're senseless, or a fumbled attempt at surgery could kill you. A Taken Out character with no Injured boxes is back in action at the end of*



*the scene. A character that has reached Taken Out and has one or more Injured results remains Taken Out until the first Injured result is recovered.”*

Disease, thirst, hunger, sleep deprivation and the like cause persistent wounds that cannot be healed until specific conditions are met.

### **Medicine in play**

The following clarifications and addendum were recently added to GTC and do not appear in the beta edition:

*“Healing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is a rather inexact art. Any MoF result for a healing skill is compared to the (damage) table above and applied as damage to the patient.*

*Some Hurt results might require medical treatment to resolve at the referee’s discretion. A Fair difficulty test using any medical skill heals this kind of Hurt box. A Hurt box that requires medical attention but does not receive it heals in one day.*

*Medical treatment can heal an Injured box faster, with one day removed per MoS above Average difficulty of an applied healing skill.*

*If Taken Out and Injured speeding the recovery of the first Injured result requires treatment with the surgeon or physician skill; lesser healing skills are of no use. As usual healing attempts can cause further damage. If a Taken Out character is Taken Out again by medical treatment the character dies. If Taken Out slow natural healing of the first Injured box is a safer option.”*

There are four healing skills Apothecary, Herbalism, Physick, and Surgeon. Apothecaries cannot charge for consultations, only medicines sold. Therefore, they concoct all manner of treatments for sale. Apothecaries are also knowledgeable in the concocting of poisons. Herbalists use plant materials to heal. Herbalists can also brew poisons from plant material. Physick is the medical skill of physicians regarding diagnosis, ailments, and disturbances of bodily humours. Physick is the study of the body, not to be confused with physicks the study of bodies. Surgery uses bleeding, cutting, stitching, amputation, bone setting, cauterising, and puncturing to the treatment of ailments and injuries. Regardless of skill, difficulty of tests to heal is determined by the severity of the wound or damage. Cooking skill is also useful for maintaining health and morale aboard a ship.

Important facts about the character are represented by Aspects. Aspects affecting healing include English Noble, Hypochondriac, Physician, Questionable Bloodline, Ship’s Surgeon, Splenetic, Stolid, Spouse, or whatever you can think up. Similarly, items of lesser importance are represented by Extras. Extras that affect damage resistance or healing include: Bubber’s Liver, Endurance, Iron Stomach, Lilliputian Ointment, Surgical Kit, and any similar ideas the players invent.

Conscience should not be forgotten as a way to boost critical rolls. Enlightenment can solve problems of anatomy, surgery, or disease. Quality can reassure anxious patients. Even Pride can manifest as overconfidence to steady one’s knife-hand or concern for one’s reputation as a surgeon causing a redoubling of efforts. Corruption in a surgeon however rarely does a patient any good.

Scale is a double-edged sword when it comes to medicine. A smaller Scale would be useful for fine work such as removing stings or suturing a face to minimise scarring. Smaller Scale might also help with diagnosis because odd rashes and the like can be seen in greater detail if brought close. However, smaller scale making it impossible to hold a patient down and greatly increases the time and difficulty of sawing bones or treating large wounds. The inverse of all this is also true, for example a Brobdingragian would have trouble doing fine surgery on a ‘rat-sized’ European but could hack off a gangrene leg with one chop of a cleaver then struggle to suture the severed arteries.

Though there is magic in Gulliver's world there is no magical healing. A character could technically return from the dead but only as a ghost.

### **Surgeon character generation**

Though herbalists and apothecaries are options for healer PCs most ships carry surgeons. The most educated surgeons are also physicians. European surgeons are often gentry of lesser means. England's universities do not yet have medical schools. English surgeons learn by apprenticeship, and physicians by attending a university in Europe. Use of the full character generation system is required if you wish to play a surgeon. The faster random lady and gentlemen generator cannot produce surgeons. Instant Sailors obviously lack the training to be surgeons. That Lemuel Gulliver, a renowned surgeon and explorer, is used as an example of character generation should be helpful. Typical aspects obviously include Surgeon, Ship's Surgeon or similar, but there are also aspects related to a university education, apprenticeship to a surgeon, and studies at the medical school at Leyden. You can use the usual methods to have a surgeon's kit handy should you need one during play. A surgeon's kit is a leather bag containing sutures, bone saws, cauterising irons, jars of leaches and other instruments needed by a surgeon. One would like one's treating surgeon to be high in Quality and Enlightenment. However, more often than not English surgeons score high in Corruption often using diagnosis to proscribe unnecessary treatments to extract fees. As for a first Goal, most seek to start their own practice but the more ambitious hope to make a medical discovery or achieve a reputation in natural history. Of course, events during your parts might suggest other Goals.

### **Advancement for surgeons**

Goals state intentions for advancement opportunities. Regardless of the aspect finally granted by the part adding ranks to medical skills is highly recommended. Interlude parts might be spent running a practice on land providing further opportunities to improve medical skills. Given the difficulty of surgery you should consider obtaining the maximum allowed number of boxes/cards on your Ship's Surgeon or other surgeon aspect. You should also consider working towards an advanced aspect representing an important medical breakthrough such as Eradicate Scurvy. Though not really an 'advancement' long stays in foreign nations can induce traveller's madness. For surgeons this might include adopting unorthodox foreign treatments or advocating healthy habits such as those the Houyhnhnms live by.

### **Lemuel Gulliver, Retired Ship's Surgeon and Explorer**

By 1730 Lemuel is an exception character something like what a PC will be like at the end of an extended campaign. While a careful reading of the last pages of *Gulliver's Travels* will find that while Lemuel is wholly against invasion of the lands he discovered, there is no comment on the prospect of trade with these nations. However, consistent with his disapproval of travelling the world when all an Englishman needs can be found within his own nation, Lemuel disapproves of the entire GTC venture. He is especially disapproving of his son taking up life at sea when the misfortunes of his father should be enough to dissuade any sane person of such a notion. Employees of the GTC will most likely encounter Lemuel eventually.

A spry 68-year old gentleman. He has a scar on his left knee.

### **Lemuel is an exceptional NPC of 15 parts.**

**Nationality:** English O

**Conscience:** Enlightenment 4, Quality 5.

**Madness:** Houyhnhnm Land 3 left as of the 1730 start date.

### **Aspects**

Family O, Mechanically Turned O, Facility with Languages O, Thirst for travel O, Educated O, Ship's surgeon O, Mrs Mary Gulliver O, Well-Travelled O, Well Read O, Financial Misfortune O, Explorer OOO, Admires Houyhnhnms O, World Explorer O, Misanthrope O.

**Extras:** Literate, Father, Estate in Epping, Black Bull inn, House at Redriff, Hated by Lilliputians, all with one box. Four ranks spent on two horses, see below.

Two horses, total cost to 4 ranks, i.e. 2 each.

Connection to each horse one rank

Each horse has: Speaks Houyhnhnm O

**Skills:** Lemuel has a large number of skills. To save space Lemuel's skills are presented differently than less accomplished NPCs. *Languages are in italics.*

**Six Ranks:** geography great

**Five ranks:** surgeon fair, navigation good

**Four ranks:** morality fair, physick fair, history fair, observation good

**Three ranks:** reason fair, conversation fair, mechanics average, trade tailor average, trade carpentry average.

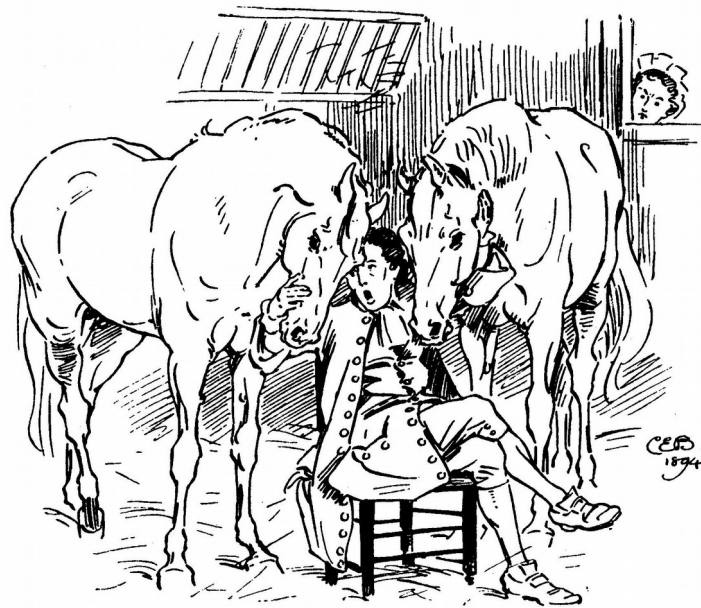
**Two ranks:** sailing\* mediocre, weapon S varies, politics mediocre, *Classical Greek average*, play spinet mediocre, *Low Dutch average*, *Latin average*, mathematics average.

**One rank:** oratory mediocre, *Lilliputian mediocre*, intrigue poor, *Brobdingragian mediocre*, debate mediocre, *High Dutch mediocre*, *Houyhnhnmese mediocre*, *Portuguese mediocre*, music mediocre, *Italian mediocre*, *English fair*, *Spanish mediocre*, *lingua franca mediocre*, swim average, *French mediocre*, *Balnibarbesse mediocre*, strategy mediocre, weapon P varies.

\*Lemuel's sailing skill is only rated poor because that is how effective he would be as a member of the crew in the rigging. When commanding a vessel, he relies on his other strong maritime skills such as navigation and use of his aspects.

**Goal:** Son Jonathan; to represent the boy coming around to Lemuel's point of view on travel and morality.

Alternatively, the aspect could represent his son's opposition to his father's wishes. News from his son's voyages may yet raise Lemuel's geography to extraordinary.



*'I converse with them.'*

# HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

*by Andrew Daborn*

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice fell into my lap after I got a recommendation for it from a psychology lecturer I used to game with ten years ago. I wasn't used to getting reviews from them so followed it up online finding some fascinating testimonies of people who had mental illnesses, or had family members who had mental illnesses speaking about how it had touched them. The conversation was mostly about the content of the game, oddly few people were speaking about the combat mechanics or graphics as is usual. This interested me and I had to give it a go.

This article contains some minor spoilers about gameplay and plot.

## Gameplay

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is a Ninja Theory game originally released in 2017 on Microsoft Windows and PlayStation 4. It has subsequently been released on Xbox One and Nintendo Switch. A sequel is due out later this year or early 2021. For reference it currently costs AUS\$42.95 on Steam. Hellblade is available in either keyboard/mouse or VR flavours. I don't have VR yet, but would be keen to try this game out in it. The surround audio and visual landscape would probably suit themselves well to this, heightening the intensity of the experience even more.

In this game you play Senua, a young Pictish warrior from the northern reaches of what are now the British Isles. We journey with her as she travels to the land of the Northmen to open the gates to Helheim, face the goddess Hel and retrieve the soul of her dead lover who had been killed in a Viking raid. A classic heroic ordeal. This is a narrative heavy game, with equal amounts problem solving and combat. On top of this is layered Senua's psychosis. We see the world through her eyes and it's full of horrors and traumas from her past that she must fight and overcome as well as a chorus of voices she can hear around her. We experience her delusions and hallucinations with her, and it is tempting to wonder what is really going on and what is only happening in her head. We hear the voices – sometimes positive and affirming, often critical and speaking Senua's self doubts. We see how the world changes around her as she looks at things in different ways re-configuring fractured bridges to rebuild them, standing in just the right spot to see a cave in a previously sheer cliff.

This game is set up in 'over the shoulder view' and I could see, front-row, how Senua's ordeal battered her and witness up close the horrors she faces. The controls were simple WASD and mouse guided. This allowed for an easy flow of movement around the landscapes of the game. It took me longer than it should have to master going down ladders, but that was on me and obvious looking back. I found that gameplay and cut-scenes smoothly flowed between each other. Unfortunately this led to it repeatedly tripping me up and locking me out of the controls, frantically expecting that Senua might die before me while hamming away at the keys. This only added to the unsettling nature of the game, but I could see how it would frustrate some. The controls did change in combat, which threw me a little too, with a fixed camera annoyingly glitching behind a post occasionally leaving me blind while Senua was backed into a corner.



It took me some time to get used to the combat system, but I am out of practice with gaming as well and after an hour I was reasonably proficient. The first few fights were tailored to teach me which helped. Having said that the battles always kept me guessing as to how hard they would be. I especially found facing multiple combatants difficult, while some end of level baddies twice Senua's size when down in a hail of sword blows with little difficulty. I found there were equal amounts button bashing and careful maneuvered tactics.

It may be important to note that there is little customisation of the controls in this game. You are stuck in third person and you can't remap your keys – at least I couldn't find a way to do it. Graphics and sound helped capture the confusion of battle nicely – the sounds of a charging Norseman from behind and shouted warnings from Senua's voices gave just enough time to dodge unseen backstabbing. Aside from the combat there was around equal amounts of exploration and puzzles with a little acrophobia inducing platforming too!

Graphics and sound in the game were crisp, and closely knitted to the story. As Senua's mind fragmented during the game, so did her view of the world around her, casting distracting shadows and visual artifacts. Accompanying this were sculpted soaring ambient chords expected of video game soundtracks alongside the horse vocals of Nordic folk with plenty of metal influences keeping me focused. The music beautifully drew me in, almost subconsciously, to this fearsome and violent culture that Senua found herself in.

The Dark Rot – ugh! So, after the first fight within the game a dark stain began to extend from Senua's hand and a message jumped up on screen:

"The Dark Rot will grow each time you fail. If the Rot reaches Senua's head her quest is over and all progress will be lost."

After this, every time Senua was defeated in combat there was a cut-scene and dark veins were again seen creeping up her arm. This gave me the impression that by me losing a fight Senua edged closer to dying with the threat of losing all

saved progress! I took this to be exciting initially – a rogue-like element that would set the beat for Senua’s story with each combat.

This is not exactly the case however as I found out after losing several battles early on. Past the fear and excitement of losing, thinking I was inching towards defeat I noticed that while the graphics showed the rot spreading, it only really progressed at key points in the story. A quick check online confirmed that others had seen this and tested this out repeatedly. This was disappointing. I felt lied to by the game, and not in the fun ‘no cake’ kind of way but in a way that related directly to how I played. Especially given the subject matter the lie seemed almost perverse. Even having played the game through to the end I am still unsure why they included this element to the story, but lied about it’s mechanical effect in game. They could have chosen not to have it and included other elements to visually represent Senua’s journey. Instead, they could also have built it in as they implied: every death leads closer to the end of the game, you only have a certain number of losses to complete the game in or the game restarts and all progress is lost. Senua’s tolerance to the rot could be set by the difficulty of the game, less losses allowed at higher difficulties. Perhaps they could have built in a way to recover somewhat from it later on in the game? On reflection it feels that I was mis-sold it. I thought it was a measure for me. It instead is a measure for how far Senua is through her story, not how far I am through hers when I play. The prophetic element of it held true in the end and the rot reaches her head in the final confrontation of the game.

It took me just over 14 hours to complete it but I’m sure those more competent than me could do it much quicker. One final note. Definitely play this with a good set of headphones!

### **The Experience**

The developers have portrayed Senua as suffering from a psychotic mental illness through using the gaming experience to highlight some common symptoms and aspects of mental illness. Our perception is Senua’s for the game and we hear her hallucinations and are confronted by her delusions as she might be too. Senua is surrounded by a cloud of voices. Some male. Some female. Some talking to her, some talking about her to each other. One, speaking directly to us the players narrating her life and commenting on past events. The voices are in turns supportive and helpful then dismissive and cruel. Often they seem to speak Senua’s own self doubts, asking if she is lost, commenting that she is scared and can’t go on or warning her of oncoming danger. Some of them seems to be people she knows, while others are not. They even help out in combat, warning of enemies attacking from behind! While this last one might not be true to life, the previous ones are. They all mirror types of voices commonly described by those who hear them. For someone, such as myself, who does not usually hear voices putting on headphones and having that immersive experience is intense.

The developers have also made use of visual hallucinations and flashbacks to express Senua’s trauma and help tell her story. Both in actual play and cut scenes there are flashbacks to past traumatic events telling the story of how Senua got to where she is now. In addition they carefully show a hypersensitivity to light and sound, with the graphics blurring at times of stress. There are moments when she is overwhelmed by events and the world of her perception shrinks down to a couple of meters around her as she tries to struggle on.

A significant part of Senua’s problem solving comes through seeing patterns around her, such as faces, eyes or runes in the shapes of things around her and making sense of them to allow her to progress to the next part. Even this can be an element of psychosis where people might see patterns in images, speech or sound that many others might not. Sort of an amplified human ability to find patterns – seeing the man in the moon or dragons in clouds - but more so.

In the creation of this project Ninja Theory made extensive use of both academics and also people with a lived

experience of psychosis. They were able to incorporate of these perspectives into the game, giving it a realistic feel, for all the glowing runes, gods and monsters.

The storyline is beautifully written. The relationships Senua has with the others in her life, her parents, Druth her mentor and Dillion her lover, must have been inspired by anecdotes of the lived experience consultants to the game too. The way her mind pulls her from and too those around her is as vivid and the impact of society's response to her psychosis – the abuse and stigma – is as debilitating to her as the psychosis itself. The story slowly delves into Senua's past as she creeps forward overcoming obstacles representative of issues within in her she has to resolve. It is an analogy of working through grief and recovering with psychosis. For anyone who has had a close friend or relative die, and if the process of dealing with it was a road, it would probably be long and wind back and forth. It would also be unique to each person. Senua's journey in game is much the same.

“Is this what this is? A world shaped by Senua's nightmares?”

At many points in the game the narrative voice asks us to empathize with Senua and question whether our viewpoint of reality is as true as we think.

“If you believe that Senua's reality is twisted you must accept that yours might be too.”

Though exploration of various ideas of mental illness, recovery and psychosis may be ideas not many of us are able to relate to the game uses more universal experiences as touchstones to help us build an understanding of what Senua is feeling. Grief, disorientation, fear and anxiety are more easy to relate to as few of us have never been afraid of fire, darkness, getting lost or heights. Whole levels of the game are set aside to explore these themes. The media of a computer game gives an opportunity to develop a strong empathy for the protagonist's experience, there with her, making choices, seeing the world as she does and feeling her fears. Ninja Theory seem to have realized this is a strong tool for educating about other people's perspectives. Have they seen other opportunities for this in the future?

Often the portrayal of someone with mental illness in media is not ideal, minimising that person's humanity. Sometimes portraying them as almost bestial in nature. They are a plot hook, a threat with no real personality attached. It's not common that they are the main protagonist and in making Senua that she is given agency over her situation. This who situation is happening because she chose to try to resolve her problems, whether they be the lost soul of her lover or her fractured mind. While the player does not have many choices in the game, it is a pretty linear story, Senua makes them all the time. Often ones we might think are unhelpful! That freedom to make choices as she searches for meaning gives her a dignity that can often be missed when people with mental illness are included in media, especially games.

This was an intense game, especially the voices. It was tiring and this was not an easy game to play for long periods of time. Many times it was an almost harrowing experience for me. I can imagine that there might be plenty of aspects of it that would be disturbing for someone who has had similar experiences and traumas to Senua, not just those of psychosis but also many aspects of family violence.

Through the game I was given many snapshots of what this can be like for people who hear voices, experience flashbacks or delusions, some taken from personal experiences. At the same time psychosis is a deeply personal experience. It would be impossible to express it in a way that everyone who has experienced mental illness would

identify with the game. It could be said that the game takes a broad approach to mental illness, trying to capture too many diverse experiences. This might not be easy for any individual with psychosis to relate to or feel validated by. In promoting this game as being about mental illness there is a danger it might alienate the people it is trying to support.

At first glance some elements of this game appear to romanticize mental illness, giving Senua magic abilities enabling her to open doors, defeat warriors in battle by focusing her 'darkness' and overcome obstacles. I was uneasy about this initially, feeling that this was not the experience most people with mental illness have – depression does not give you super powers. On reflection however this game is about Senua's perspective of reality and her battles. These powers she has are within the same frame of reference as the daemons she must overcome and the information she gets from her visions and voices. We never get the privilege of being an outsider watching Senua's day as she struggles through it and would have to speculate what we could see then. My point is that, Senua's struggles and the resolution she has for them both come from her and are for her legitimate ways of solving her problems.

This issue, and that of dignity, I believe are central to a more inclusive depiction of mental illness in games of all sorts. This has to include removing the stigma associated with mental illness. That can only come through educating people about what the experiences of having mental illness can be like and by creating portrayals of mental illness that can be related to and not alienating for those who have mental illness themselves.

### **In Conclusion**

This was an entertaining game, with a compelling protagonist and simple game play that sucked me in with masterful use of visual and auditory effects. What is more it tackled the complex and often taboo subject of mental health with bravery and compassion. Did Ninja Theory get everything right? Probably not. Having said that as a game it is one of the first to explore this topic in this way and I believe they have made significant headway towards better representation of mental health in games. I look forward to their sequel coming soon!



# RADIOACTIVE REVIEW

by Andrew Moshos



dir: Marjane Satrapi 2020

Radioactive, huh? You were waiting for a biopic of one of the most famous scientists of the last couple of centuries, like maybe to show kids in school, or, these days, tell kids to download themselves and watch in the privacy of their own bedrooms / juvenile delinquency cells.

You thought maybe Rosamund Pike, brilliant British actor, would make a decent go of the role (no pressure). After all, if she could play the real protagonist of *Gone Girl*, she could probably do all right with the *Mother of Uranium Dragons*, you thought.

But then you might not have realised that the way the script was going to be written, or the direction she'd be given, encouraged her to perform the character like every cliché of the mad scientist that I thought we gave up on when the *Back to the Future* films ended. I don't actually have a good sense or picture in my head of what *Madam Curie* was actually like as a person, from either this movie (which I hope is either wrong or an exaggeration) or from the vast tranche of materials available

about her life and her incredible achievements.

I just really wish that the flick hadn't pursued the course of: brilliant female scientist probably somewhere on the spectrum meets male scientist who really "gets" her, then all her affectations and Tourette's-like behavior flies out the window, because all she really needed was the love of a good man to settle her down. Sure, she's brilliant at a time when society frowns at women being anything, including brilliant, but nevertheless she persisted and changed science / the world / had to be accepted despite her astonishing manner. It would be just as annoying, and it is just as annoying, when they do the same with the genders reversed.

I also don't know what the relationship between Marie and Pierre (here played by Sam Wiley) was like in real life, but I can console or comfort myself with the idea that much of what they do here together is pretty good, as in I eventually accepted that it was a believable (somehow) portrait of what these two brilliant people might have been like together. The most surprising part of the film is that after they choose to get married, in a flick which was mostly comprised of people pouring stuff into beakers or mortar and pestling rocks containing radioactive materials, and Marie usually squawking out her thoughts and what she imagines the other person is thinking, rather than waiting to hear them actually speak, was a quiet interlude in the country. Out of nowhere, in a film that thus far has been about Marie's anger at not being taken seriously because of her gender, and dismissing everything anyone says or might say, in this bit out of nowhere, they ride bikes, swim in a lake, and lie on a blanket, naked, chatting amiably.

It's not a sex scene per se, but it will do. These are both young attractive people playing older than they are, so I guess they have to remind us they're not just fusty old looking serious people from the olden times, they also like to laugh and fuck too.

Back to work, though, which is a far more serious business. And when you consider the work they do, goddamn, there are so many scenes that are meant to flat out make us wonder how naïve these brilliant people were. Even as they contributed massively to the fields of chemistry and physics, even as they figured out stuff about atoms and radioactivity (hence the title) that no-one had figured out before (or were actually figuring out at the same time as their peers were, as is usually the case rather than the totally out of nowhere lightbulb moment that most scientific advancement is depicted as in biopics), seeing them touching these materials that are horribly radioactive, and making them sick, and making the people around them sick is – a lot to take.

We only know with the benefit of hindsight just how ludicrous (and terrible) it was that people started selling Radium Cigarettes or Radium Toothpaste or Radium cough lollies, but to Pierre and Marie it just seems like a minor folly, even as they themselves start noticing odd health impacts upon themselves and the people in their employ / field.

The film chooses to do something pretty out there, considering it's a biopic, in terms of looking at the ripples that fan out from any time anyone has advanced science by an order of magnitude – it ties in scenes from way in the future, from the 1940s, 1950s and 1980s, anchoring them to the person whose discoveries made them possible. At first I wondered, honestly, what the fuck was going on: a peaceful scene as a child throws a paper plane, on the streets of Hiroshima seconds before the Enola Gay passes overhead; people paying 50 cents a pop to watch a test atom bomb explosion at New Mexico while the actual people involved sit in a bunker; a worried father takes his boy to have his cancer treated with radiation; a fireman succumbs almost immediately to radiation poisoning at Chernobyl.

I'm not saying the film lays the blame for these advances or occurrences at her feet solely, but it's not not blaming her either. The link is in the speech Pierre gives as he receives the Nobel that Marie earned, where he outlines the resonant irony that Nobel started the prize out of guilt for what his own invention wrought upon the world as a tool and as a weapon of war. A scientist who invents something that can be used to heal millions of people as well as kill many of them through a different use of the same underlying principles presumably, in this story's rendering, has to take the credit for both.

It's not really that convincing an argument to me, but I'm not sure that's the case the film is making anyway. These elements are from the book this is based on, being the graphic novel *Radioactive: Marie & Pierre: A Tale of Love and Fallout* by Lauren Redniss. It also uses the annoying framing device of a famous person at a crucial moment, in this case, Madam Curie collapsing close to death because of her aplastic anemia, then looking back on her life as it slowly ebbs away from her, and it ends where it obviously ends.

The question for us as viewers is whether it gives a good enough sense of who the person was, what they did that mattered, and why we needed to watch a film about it. The film does bother to go into the fact that Madam Curie was Polish, and that guided a lot of her feelings towards her adoptive but hostile second country. It shows how much of a struggle it was for the old guard of literal old male scientists to let her in the door, the poor diddums, but not the lengths they went to in order to keep it shut. It shows how the public and press turn on her for reasons that seem baffling these days, especially considering these are French people we're talking about. And while it shows the convenience with

which she is attacked for being Polish and Jewish (despite not being Jewish) when she is in disfavor, but celebrated and embraced as French whenever she wins some prestigious awards, they don't really make enough of a point that she didn't particularly consider herself French either.

Her daughters play a role in the film, not a huge role, but considering that Irene (the elder daughter eventually being played by Anja Taylor-Joy) would go on to make her own scientific discoveries, and build the first reactor in France (with the help of a lackey husband), it's important that she's there. She also (and I don't know if this is true) forces her mother to redeem herself in the eyes of France by compelling her to face her fear of hospitals.

As this is a biopic, there has to be one primary event that informs and colours every single thing the person achieves thereafter, and for the young Marie it is the death of her mother because of tuberculosis. The aversion towards hospitals has to be triumphed over in order for her biggest achievement, which I had no idea about, being the creation of mobile x-ray machines used on the battlefields of World War I.

And it's oh so neat and tidy that it becomes the way she redeems herself for the future destruction that she made possible. How the fuck was she supposed to know?

I loved neither the script nor the majority of the performances overall. I liked how it came together visually, as in many of the linkages to the themes of her life and her work in the way they're realised on screen. It's a conventional biopic that tells you some facts but leaves the central personage a bit of a blank slate. I have seen Rosamund Pike be great in stuff, but not here. This was probably sold to her as Oscarbait that would definitely get her the one she was owed for *Gone Girl*, where she was cruelly robbed, but in this era of the coronavirus flattening everything, this isn't going to stand out enough to be memorable in six month's time.

I've loved Marjane Satrapi's work ever since reading and then watching *Persepolis* what feels like a million years ago now, so I always enjoy watching her evolve as an artist and as a director. I just... didn't love *Radioactive*. It did not speak to me despite the richness of the person it is about and the subject matter at hand. I don't pretend to know what the better way would have been to tell this story, let alone as an Amazon Original, but this doesn't feel like it was it.

6 times they could have used Kraftwerk's song *Radioactivity*, or even Stereolab's cover out of 10

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"You threw a stone in the water. The ripples, you can't control. There are things to be scared of, but there's so much to celebrate."

- "I hope you're right. I hope you're right." - *Radioactive*

Rating: 6 stars

*Originally posted at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/radioactive>*

# *Next Issue of RPG REVIEW*

*Issue #48, September 2020  
Supernatural Places and Beings*

**RELICS DESIGNER'S NOTES  
AD&D TO HELL AND BACK  
PLANESCAPE & THE GREAT WHEEL D&D5e  
DEMON THE FALLEN SCENARIO  
THE OTHERSIDE IN GLORANTHA  
UNKNOWN ARMIES REVEALED**

